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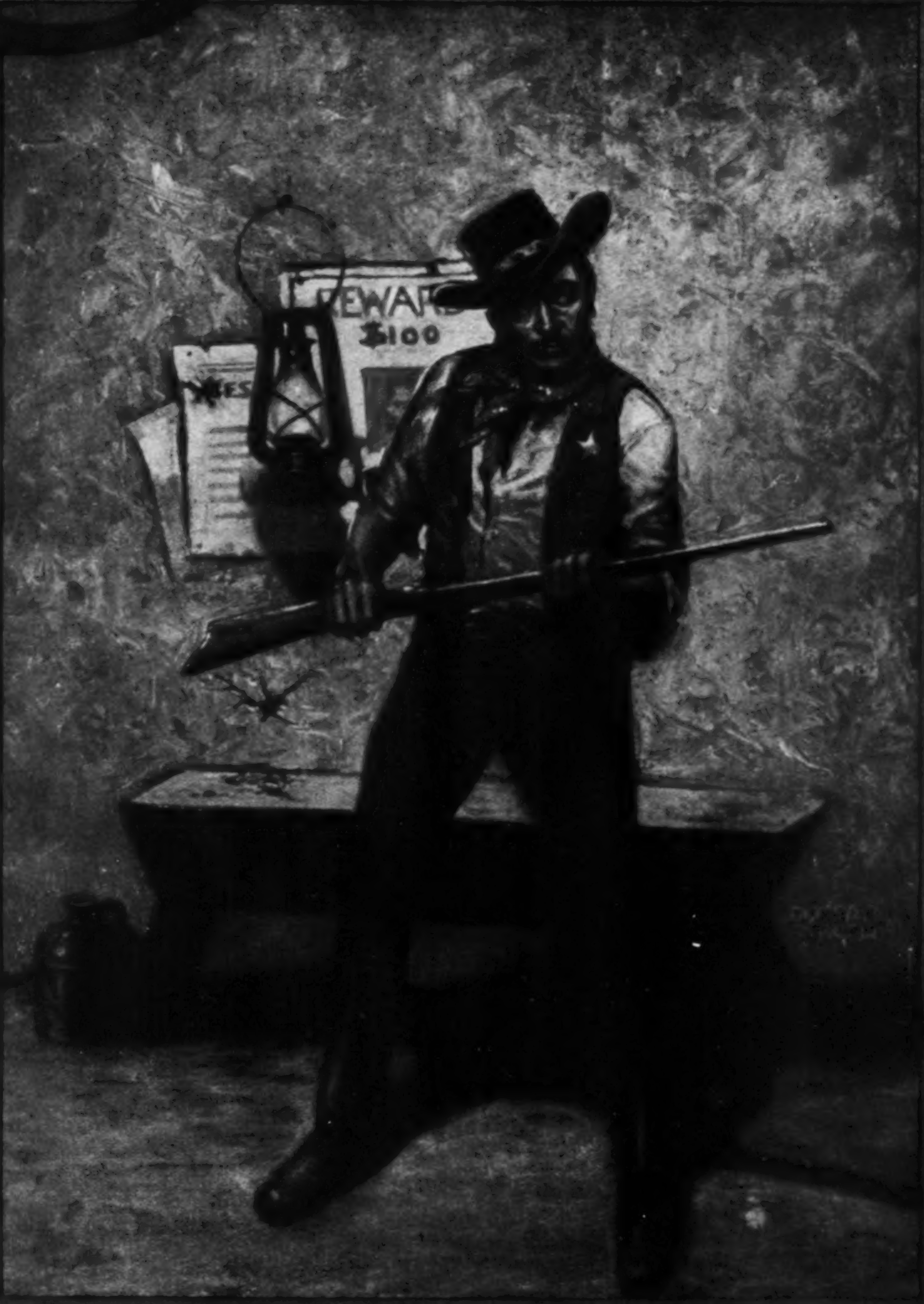
Stories of Action Everywhere

Everybody's

November
1928



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AFTER EVERY MEAL

November, 1928
Vol. LIX No. 5

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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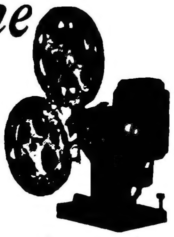

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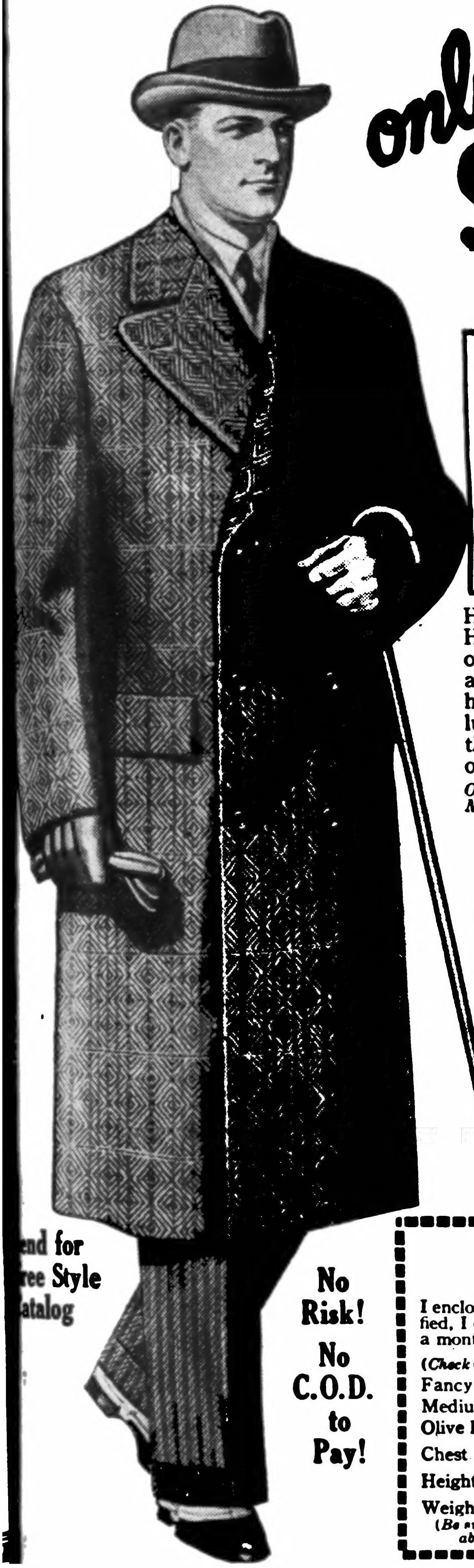

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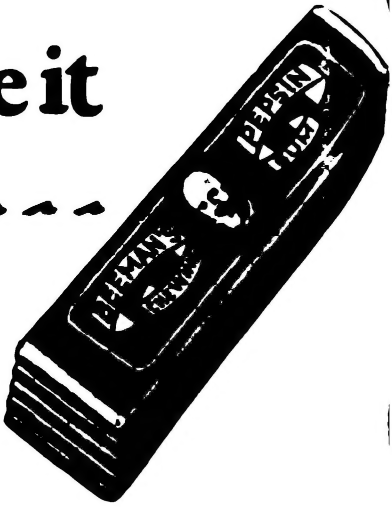

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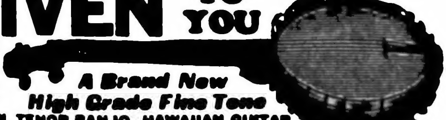

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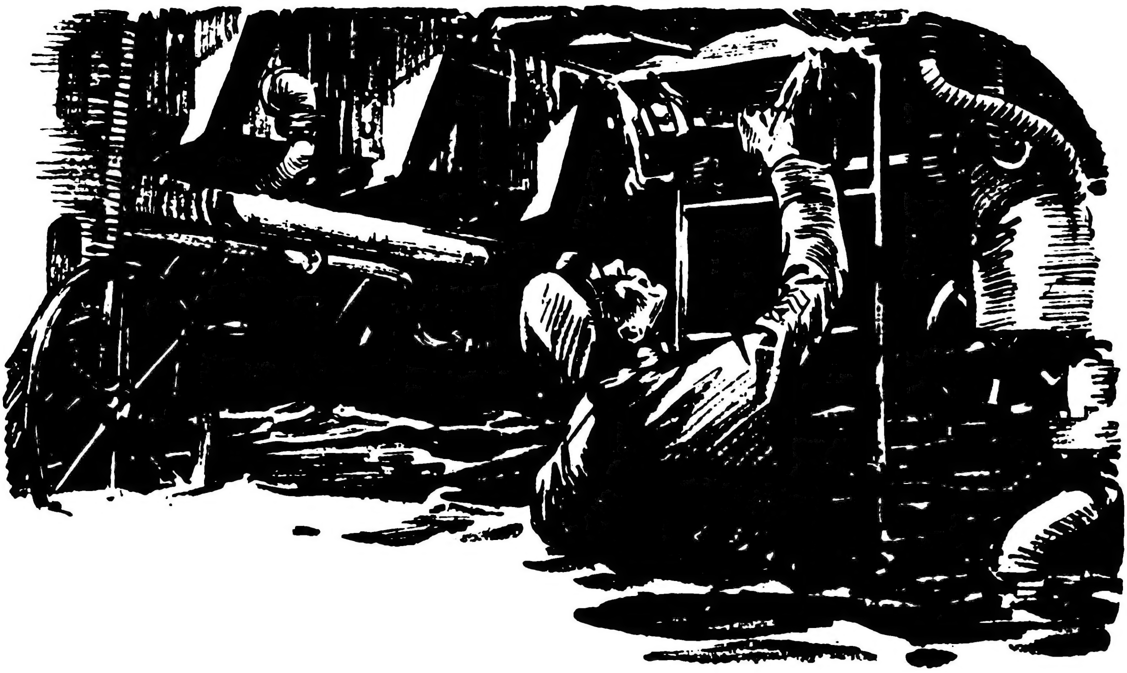


L. MURNEY MINTZER

Tells of a Battle for Life in the Grip of the Cold Green Waters

SURVIVAL

THE northeast trades were piling successive lines of surf on the breakwater as the *H-24* neared its outer end on her way to the open sea. Even in the comparatively sheltered water the submarine's horizontal bow rudders scooped up foaming water that cascaded down on the low foredeck. A big, rawboned old chief petty officer stood by the gun, directing the routine preparations for diving. Apparently, he did not notice the water that slapped around his feet, for, instead of hurrying the men, he frowned slightly at their quite evident haste. Jorgens resented haste. Just now, although he gave no sign, he was quite conscious of the impatience of Lieutenant Gaynor, the new executive officer, who was moving nervously about the tiny bridge on top of the conning tower amidships.

"Here!" he called to the men who were closing the forward torpedo hatch. "Not so fast, sailors. Pass down that canvas." He pointed at an old tarpaulin lying on deck.

"Bear a hand, Jorgens!" Gaynor called sharply. "It'll be rough outside."

"Aye, aye, sir," Jorgens acknowledged without looking up. He straightened slowly and looked to seaward to confirm his estimate of the time it would take them to clear the breakwater.

The torpedo hatch was already closed, and, hearing what the officer said, the men hesitated.

"We can take it down the after hatch," one of them protested.

"It belongs in the forward torpedo room," Jorgens explained mildly. "Open up the hatch. There's lots of time. No need of gettin' in a sweat." Grumbling slightly they obeyed.

Gaynor frowned irritably. He resented the careless informality of the submarine that permitted a chief machinist's mate to take a hand on deck. He watched Jorgens turn and walk aft, moving slowly and scanning the deck fittings carefully. The men finished with the hatch and hurried below. Gaynor transferred his attention to the afterdeck. His mouth tightened again as he watched Jorgens' ponderous movements.

"Shake it up, Jorgens! Shake it up!"

"Aye, aye, sir." Still unruffled, the old fellow moved about unhurriedly.

Captain Lane, who lounged behind Gaynor on the bridge, had watched the byplay between the two. More familiar with the old chief's peculiarities than Gaynor, he was inclined to make allowances for him. And Gaynor, Lane had noticed, was a little overfond of battleship notions of discipline. Ten years in the underwater craft had taught Lane how much depended on the less conspicuous qualities in men. He smiled slightly as he watched Jorgens now, but his expression grew serious as he noted the stoop in the man's shoulders, the sparse gray hair under his shapeless cap. The chief was old—and slow. And the submarines were a young man's outfit. A good soft billet in a navy yard now? With a guilty feeling that he was thrusting aside the thought of an unwelcome duty, Lane moved over and glanced at the compass.

Presently Jorgens climbed to the bridge and reported:

"Rigged for diving, sir."

Lane glanced at the breakwater. The light on its extremity was just abeam. His eyes twinkled slightly as he watched Jorgens climb down through the hatch.

"Rigged for diving, sir," Gaynor formally repeated the report.

"All right," Lane acknowledged. "We'll hold on past the breakwater for fifteen minutes or so and then go down. After the chief engineer has his hour's run submerged, we'll do two or three practice dives . . . It'll be drier down below," he added, as he watched a green sea sweep up over the bow and slap against the base of the conning tower.

Gaynor drew his sweater close about his neck and glowered at the breakwater. Alone, except for the quartermaster at the wheel, the two fell silent.

"How about Jorgens, Captain?" Gaynor asked, after an interval.

"Why?" Lane parried, knowing what was coming.

"You know him better than I do, Captain." Gaynor was striving to conceal his feeling. "I'd say he's too slow. Too hopelessly wooden for submarines."

"He's been in these boats a long time," Lane said good-humoredly.

"That's just it," Gaynor retorted heatedly. "Been in them too long. Thinks he owns the boat."

"Pretty fair man yet, though. Not as wooden as he looks. I'll admit he's slow."

"Then why not transfer him?"

Inclined to take life calmly himself, Lane resented being pushed, even into an action that he was already considering. He stirred impatiently and there was a note of irritation in his voice as he answered:

"I'll talk it over with you when we get in. There's no hurry."

AMONG the submarines based on Coco Solo the *H-24* enjoyed several advantages. Her inspections were apt to be more or less perfunctory affairs designed to let the men know that their efforts were appreciated rather than to lay bare possible weaknesses. But mainly, she went her way untroubled by interference from above. If her captain asked the commodore for anything, which happened rarely, he usually got it. Among the men of the division, certainly not a partial jury where another boat than their own was concerned, it was generally conceded that the *24* rated all she got. And when a vacancy occurred in her complement, there was no lack of applicants for transfer to her.

When any of her crew were called upon to describe their boat they did not hesitate over the choice of terms. She was a "home"—which among bluejackets is the last word of praise. Sometimes they might add that she flew the "meat ball"—the red pennant with the black ball that stood for the Submarine Battle Efficiency Trophy. But, at least when talking to other enlisted men, that was rather an anticlimax. In spite of the advantages in the way of prize money that came with the official distinction, any bluejacket knows that more lasting, if less conspicuous benefits, accompany the unofficial one.

As all the division knew, the chief petty officers on the *24* were hand-picked, men who knew submarines inside and out. And Captain Lane had served long enough on the boats to know a good submarine man when he saw him. So it was a little surprising that Jorgens should stay on. Of course, the old fellow had lots of service behind him—most of it in submarines, too. Among the younger men he was almost a legendary figure, identified in their minds with the beginnings of the submarine service, the *Porpoise* and the *Holland*. But the division agreed that he was about done, ready for a navy yard job in some back channel tug. Of course, some of the older chiefs, men who had been shipmates with Jorgens, demurred a little, said he had always been like that, slow, even a bit thick, a queer duck from the start but wise in the somewhat temperamental ways of submarines. But even they usually agreed that no man had ever been slower than Jorgens. And everyone had always said that the submarines were a young man's service. Except that they were not quite so outspoken about it, Jorgen's own shipmates on the *24* were pretty much of the same opinion.

Jorgens reigned over the *24's* tiny engine room with only nominal supervision by a very young engineer officer. Afloat or submerged he could usually be found bending his tall form in affectionate scrutiny of the intricacies of the twin Deisels. Others might spend their time around the radio forward but the only music Jorgens cared about was the busy clatter of his power plant. There were men who swore that he prayed to the engines. Perhaps he did. If so, they heeded his prayers. For anything that engines can do, the *24's* engines did for Jorgens.

Slow, unhurried, painstaking, he had never been known to betray haste or excitement. Like most men whose lives run always in one channel, he had his own way of doing things, a way that apparently took absolutely no account of time. This peculiarity was so continually apparent that few men ever saw any contradiction between it and the constantly excellent performance of the *24's* engines, a performance to which, of course, the boat largely owed her record in battle efficiency. Because the boat got along without breakdowns their absence was accepted as a matter of course, in spite of the frequent difficulties of others.

If time apparently meant little to Jorgens, details obviously meant much. He had learned years ago that the engines themselves were simply a combination of many quite simple parts. Engineer officers and even petty officers, thinking in the impressive and slightly vague terms of engineering performance sheets, were apt to forget that. Jorgens, perhaps because he could only see one part, think only of one thing, at a time, never did. So when others credited engines, and particularly Deisel engines, with human or diabolical intelligence, he never got beyond seeing them as perfectly reliable instruments in which nothing ever occurred without a cause.

He applied the same principle—if such a term can be used to describe an entirely unconscious process—to the boat herself. And because he had seen the underwater craft develop from the very beginning, he never found anything complicated about the intricate mass of machinery that filled them. In a way, his slow mind was responsible for it too. It never permitted him to jump ahead and drag in perplexing contradictions to disturb his peace. More often than any of them realized, officers and men called on him to solve some problem of air connections or oil manifolds. When they did, his infinite deliberation about it was apt to obscure the fact that he did what he set out to do.

When Gaynor reported aboard, a vague uneasiness stirred through the boat, the inevitable reluctance of a tight little community to absorb a new element. The captain had noticed it and recalled his own hesitation at taking a new second in command fresh from battleship duty, a man who had been out of submarines for several years. Showing Gaynor about the boat the first day, he had seen him stiffen at the sight of Jorgens puttering on deck in undershirt and undeniably greasy dungaree trousers. Perhaps that had first brought the old chief unfavorably to Gaynor's attention. Then, as the officer had taken hold energetically, apparently fitting smoothly into the complement, the captain's concern had faded. In spite of a quick impatience that jarred slightly on the quiet harmony of the *24,* the new officer quickly fitted into his place on board. The crew accepted him with no more than the usual amount of grumbling, and, except where Jorgens was concerned, his own critical air wore off.

It was not surprising that Gaynor developed a marked dislike for Jorgens. The new second was a small man, quick, impatient, full of nervous energy, the very antithesis of the plodding chief. In the enforced intimacy of the submarine the two saw a great deal of each other. Little, trivial clashes constantly occurred that kept Gaynor's resentment hot against what he accepted as the other's stupidity. Hurrying through the boat he was sure to find his way blocked by Jorgens' big body. If he found that they were ahead of schedule and suggested to the captain that they get underway a half hour earlier than had been planned the night before, the engineer officer was sure to protest, on the grounds that Jorgens hadn't quite finished some job. The knowledge that the chief was usually justified by previously issued orders did not lessen the officer's anger.

THEY had rounded the breakwater and were rolling heavily as seas swept against the starboard side and poured around the base of the gun mount. Gaynor still stared moodily at the horizon. Vaguely disturbed by the way the other kept himself stirred up over Jorgens, Lane was frowning slightly as he looked at his subordinate. The thought that the executive officer's irritability might show up while he was handling the boat was disquieting. No place there for carelessness or sudden, ill-considered impulse. Lane shivered as a volley of spray swept over them and walked over to glance from the chart to the already distant breakwater.

"We'll go down," he announced briefly. "Gaynor, after the submerged run you can bring her up for the first dive." He nodded at the quartermaster who unshipped his gyro repeater, picked up his chart and scrambled through the hatch. Gaynor slung his glasses around his neck and followed.

In a moment, a buzzer sounded beside one of the voice tubes.

"Control manned, sir," a thin voice reported. "Steering from below. Course—four, seven, p. s. c."

"Very good," Lane acknowledged. "Stand by."

The sound of quiet orders came through the hatch. The low muttering of the engine exhaust stopped abruptly and the vibration of the hull ceased. As she lost way, the sea on the beam rolled her more violently. Then a smoother tremor set up, the pulsation of the motors, and she slipped ahead more slowly than before. The diving rudders on the bow moved up and down like the fins of a fish, then came to rest at an angle. Lane scanned the horizon in all directions then leaned over the open hatch.

"Ride the vents," he called. Down below, flooding valves opened and the boat began to settle as water flooded her tanks against the pressure maintained by the closed air vents. Lane hesitated, watching the rising water from across the deck and around the conning tower. With the unconscious care of long habit he searched the horizon again for surface ships. Nothing appeared but an endless succession of white capped waves. Spray swept over him, and, flinching, he tossed his cigaret overboard and scrambled through the hatch, punching the alarm button as he climbed down.

The raucous blat of the klaxons filled the boat with their momentary clamor and ceased. As the hatch closed over Lane's head, all the noise of wind and water was instantly replaced by the peaceful quiet of the interior.

For a moment longer, the low shape slid along on the surface. Water curled higher around the conning tower and the gun, splashing across the deserted bridge. The shape shrank rapidly. Behind the raised mound over her bow, gleaming foam traced streaks and patches of white against the green film that covered the deck. The dull gray solid surfaces faded, leaving the gun and conning tower as small moving islets in the boiling wake of the bow rudders. Then nothing but the solitary finger of the periscope pointed at the sky.

Around the eye ports in the conning tower, millions of tiny white air spheres swirled in the darkening blue, softening the hard outlines of the gun and the bow, still surprisingly distinct through the water. Below, in the quiet control room, men twirled wheels with their eyes on the multiplicity of gauges about them. Air sighed through unseen valves and was still. The pitch of the deck increased sharply while the pointer on the round face of the depth gauge moved steadily around to fifty feet, wavered uncertainly and came to rest.

A pleasant air of quiet absorption settled over the boat. In the engine room, two or three men moved in the narrow aisle between the two rows of silent cylinders. Jorgens, always grateful for the quiet below, paused in the doorway and looked around contentedly. Up on deck, with Gaynor watching him, he had been uneasy in spite of his appearance of complete absorption in his work. But here, in the familiar surroundings, contentment came back. The antagonism of the officer was not a new experience for Jorgens. Other quick, impatient young officers had found his ways objectionable, bothered him for a while and had been forgotten.

WHEN, an hour later, Gaynor entered the engine room, Jorgens was on his knees, peering at the holding down bolts of the port engine. Gaynor had temporarily forgotten the chief, but, now, as he found his way blocked, his anger flared up again.

"Gangway!" he called, looking down at the back of Jorgens' neck.

Jorgens scrambled to his feet obediently and stood grinning slightly as he absently wiped his hands on a ball of waste. His mind was on other, more pleasant things, than his trouble with the exec.

But the sight of the chief's grin produced Gaynor's anger.

"You might be overhauling the men's clothes bags," he suggested, with a heavy sarcasm that was lost on Jorgens.

Quite without malice, the old man kept on grinning. His thought clung to the holding down bolts.

"Bag inspection, man!" Gaynor's voice rose and the other men looked up curiously. "Have them lay out their clothes!"

Even while he spoke, the officer knew that there was no time for bag inspection, knew that he was showing himself up before the men.

But Jorgens was undisturbed, considering, as he always did, the other's words.

"We're standing by to go up. Going to cut in the engines, sir," he reminded the officer, mildly. Then, because it always made him vaguely uncomfortable to see an officer in the wrong he added: "They's lots of time, Mister Gaynor. No hurry with that. We has bag inspection on Fridays after we ties up. Lots of time, sir."

Any other officer would have known that Jorgens had no thought of patronizing, was merely stating a fact. But it flicked Gaynor on the raw. Beyond the chief he saw the other men nudging each other. Turning quickly to hide his temper he bolted forward.

Lane was leaning over the small chart board, plotting their estimated position, when Gaynor hurried into the control room. Glancing up he called:

"You can take her up now, Gaynor."

Eager to conceal his anger, knowing that it was ridiculous, Gaynor stepped quickly over to the gauge board, glanced at it and called:

"Stand by. Blow the auxiliary. Tell the engine room to stand by."

He snapped out the orders with a biting emphasis that made Lane straighten and stare across at him.

A submarine is apt to come up much faster than she can go down, if due regard is not given to matters of trim. And just then, Gaynor was in no mood to give due regard to anything. The pitch of the deck increased as the bow lifted. Gaynor punched the button of the periscope elevator and leaned down to grab the handles as the long tube lifted noiselessly. The needle of the depth gauge moved rapidly around. Seventy—sixty—fifty.

"She's a bit light for'rd," Lane cautioned quietly. Then as he glanced again at the depth gauge he added, "There's lots of time, Gaynor. No hurry."

Gaynor winced at hearing Jorgens' favorite phrase. The boat, catching the effect of the seas overhead, began to roll, her extreme pitch giving her an unusual twisting motion. But Gaynor stood unmoved at the periscope, waiting to make sure that the sea was clear. The depth gauge slid around faster. If he tried to stop her now, at periscope depth, she'd probably start down again. He bit his lip and waited.

"Shall I flood the auxiliary again, sir?" a man at the valves asked uncertainly.

"No!" Gaynor barked without taking his eyes from the periscope. The boat heeled over suddenly and he put out his hand to steady himself. The periscope was above the surface. He turned it hurriedly, unmindful of the fact that water on the glass all but obscured his vision. Instead of leveling off, to make sure that the surface was clear, he snapped up the handles and pressed the button that started the glass down again.

"All clear," he announced briefly and turned instantly to look at the depth gauge. Realizing that his impatience was betraying him into making a poor showing he refused to meet Lane's eye.

But Lane, thinking of Gaynor's brief glimpse of the horizon, stepped forward.

"I'll take her," he said quietly. "Down rudder! Flood the——"

With a dull crash that rolled the boat half over, something struck her, forward. Instantly there was a rush of water, startled shouts, and a violent, scraping sound.

"Blow everything!" Lane called above the noise. "Stand by the hatch!"

THE shock threw Jorgens against the port engine. He straightened and turned instinctively to run forward toward the escape hatch. Looking through the forward door he could see men struggling. Vaguely he realized that men from aft were thrusting by him. He felt the bow lurch upward suddenly.

"Must have blowed A," he said aloud.

He ran aft and looked through the door, making sure that all were out. The upward motion of the boat stopped abruptly as he turned to go forward. The motors were stopped and she rolled violently. He heard shouts, water gleamed in the passage forward. He was running now, but his feet seemed to drag as in a nightmare. At the forward door of the engine room he hesitated a second. Something in the back of his mind seemed to be trying to hold him back. He could see into the control room more clearly now. Men were milling under the conning tower hatch. In an undertone he could hear seas breaking against the sides of the boat. No weather for swimming. Still his thought fumbled for something. In the after battery compartment he saw water lapping over the sill of the forward door, cascading down on deck and slipping toward him. In the middle of the compartment he stopped still, then turned and flung himself at the door of the engine room.

Behind him, as he leaped, he heard something like a groan that was instantly drowned in the thunder of falling water. As he caught the engine room door and slammed it shut behind him, a wall of water surged through the battery compartment. The lights winked out as it drenched the batteries under the deck. Water spurted between the frame and the door, as he clamped the dogs, feeling for them in the darkness. He went back over them, feeling each dog to make sure that it was tight. The bulkhead rumbled ominously as the water pressure mounted, but the dogs and gaskets were tight and the door was strong.

Jorgens straightened and paused to consider. Characteristically, he completed the thought that had interrupted his progress through the battery compartment.

"Knew if she was making water that fast for'rd she'd take it down the hatch before they could climb out."

That had been what had held him back as he went forward.

He reached up in the dark and closed the valve on the galley ventilating line, a six inch line that would have filled the compartment rapidly, once the water reached the top of the battery compartment. He could feel the boat sinking now, rapidly, as water filled the forward compartments. With the sudden cessation of activity he became conscious of the absolute darkness. She was sinking . . . How far? How much water? He dismissed the question as soon as it occurred to him. That he could not control. Might be shallow water; probably only about a hundred feet. If not . . . But he went on to consider what he could do. His imagination had never bothered with what would happen to a submarine that exceeded the depth for which she was designed.

The bulkhead grumbled again. Hearing water striking the engine he felt for the voice tube and touched a two inch jet. That would ease the pressure a little. He stood quite still in the darkness, going over possible means of escape slowly, carefully; allowing no step to pass unnoticed . . . The square hatch overhead . . . But the pressure outside? Flood the compartment until the air pressure inside equalized it. The water coming through the voice tube would do that slowly. The warning bite of chlorine gas rasped at his throat and nose. Of course, the water coming in from the flooded battery compartment. The main exhaust line from the engines. That would deliver water free from chlorine. But he dismissed it as delivering water too fast.

THE boat bumped softly, grated and came to rest. She was on the bottom then. How far down, he had no means of knowing . . . The chlorine was not bad, yet. He climbed up on the engine and felt for the clips of the hatch. Having located them he went forward and secured a wrench, noting as he did so that the water was already above his knees. He waded aft, felt along the bulkhead and secured a life jacket. After stripping off his clothes he put it on and climbed back onto the engine. The luminous dial of the clock on the forward bulkhead caught his eye. Three o'clock.

He struggled silently with the clips. A nut was jammed. He clambered down and found a larger wrench. This time he had to duck his head under to reach the tool locker. But still unhurried he climbed back again. When he got the nut loose, water spattered down in his face. Cautiously he loosened the strongback; then went back over the nuts to make sure that they were backed off.

He knocked the pins out. The hatch lifted slightly, water splashed over him and it clanged shut again. Not enough pressure. He secured the pins again. Air was leaking out around the hatch. The water from the voice tubes was not enough, then. Must flood faster or he would lose the air pressure. Once more he climbed down and reopened the galley ventilation line. A rush of water cascaded down upon his shoulders. The added chlorine bit viciously. But the water rose rapidly now. He looked again at the clock. Three-twenty.

But his lungs seemed to be on fire. Realizing that he could not stand the gas much longer he splashed over to the engine and once more prepared to raise the hatch. The water reached to his waist as he stood with his head slightly bent, touching the hatch. He knocked out the pins. The hatch lifted and he grasped the coaming to haul himself through. Fighting the water, holding his breath, he started through. A stunning blow on his head. For a moment his senses left him; then a searing pain in his right hand brought him back to consciousness. It was crushed between the hatch and the coaming. He managed to jam the wrench under the hatch and haul his fingers clear.

The pain surged through him, mingling strangely with the burning of the gas. He seemed to hear a voice talking, mumbling slowly. Then, with a start, he recognized it as his own. The air pressure increased rapidly.

Patiently he went back over what he had done, trying to see why he had failed. The pain in his hand plucked at his mind, but, doggedly, he refused to be distracted. The air pressure. That was it. Not enough . . . His mind wandered a little . . . How would they get her up? The water was rising slowly now, it seemed. But it would soon be up to the deck. The thought roused him. The pressure wouldn't raise the hatch—too much air leaking out around the gaskets. One more chance then. Flood her fast and get out just when the compartment filled. The main exhaust valves? Could he reach them? After fastening his wrench under the strongback he felt his way along the top of the cylinders.

Taking a long breath he dropped down between the engines and pulled himself along with his good hand until he felt the valve. Ignoring the pain he braced himself with the other hand and tugged. Twice he had to come up for air before a tremendous boiling of water announced that the valve was open. The water rose so fast that he barely had time to reach the hatch again. Weakness swept over him. But holding his head far back to catch the last of the precious air he tugged at the pins. Abruptly the hatch lifted, water surged around him and he was suddenly comfortable, floating in some pleasant, blue lighted medium.

LATER, in the hospital ashore, the commodore himself told Jorgens the rest: How a wandering tramp ship had felt a sudden shock and saw a submarine roll up from under her bows in a sea that swept clear over her. How the tramp, with a great hole torn in her bottom, had raced for the beach after seeing three or four figures appear briefly on the submarine's conning tower only to be swept away. Two hours later a destroyer, standing by a splotch of oil on the uneasy surface of the sea, had seen a gleaming naked figure shoot half out of the water and fall back with a splash, close alongside.

RIVER'S RISE

The Story of a Far, Lost Corner of Empire, When the Storm of War Rolled Over the Frontier

By

L. PATRICK GREENE

OUT of the desert he came, limping beside his tired mule. His face, tanned a deep mahogany, was wrinkled as if it had been steeped too long in water. His sandy mustache, bleached by white hot suns, drooped down over his firm lips. He used that mustache as a filter when he drank desert water. His ragged, shapeless clothes covered a slim, iron hard frame; covered a body scored with scars—scars made by bullets, knives and the poisoned arrows of the desert bushmen.

He looked like a tramp, a penniless Sundowner; but he carried on his person a king's ransom which he had won from the desert.

For the desert is rich in many things prized by civilization. But it hides them even more cunningly than it hides its water, and it takes guts and luck to make the Kalahari—South Africa's great thirst land—give up its wealth.

Peg Sanders had guts. And he *made* his luck.

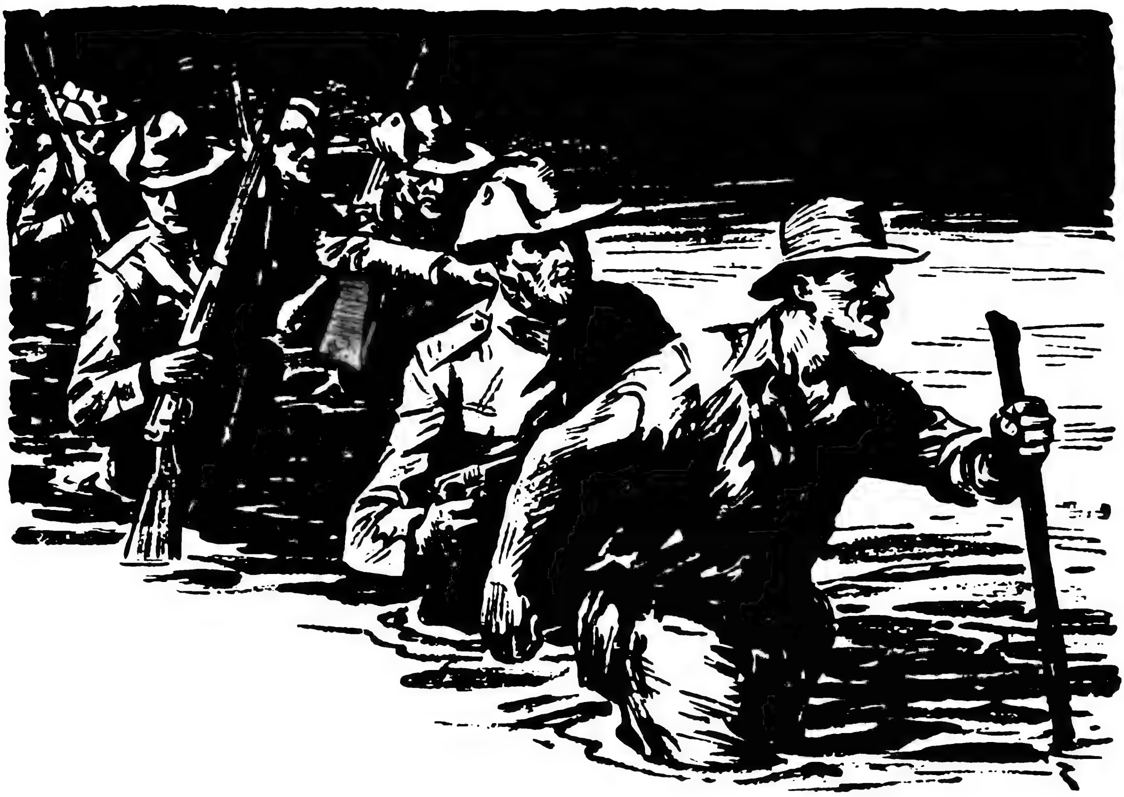
For seven years he had trekked through the desert land. Occasionally he had had the company of desert pygmies; occasionally, for a few days at a time, he traveled with Boer farmers—full bearded, unwashed patriarchs who eked out a primitive existence on the borders of the Great Thirst. And, at uncertain intervals, when his provisions gave out, he had visited one or other of the tiny settlements to refit.

But, for the most part of that long seven years, he had faced all the hardships and perils of the desert, alone. One puny man, limping beside his bony mule; a grotesque shadow moving slowly across a vast, shadowless desolation.

North, south, east and west he had roamed, following a will-o'-the wisp rumor, tracking down all the stories of the Bushman's Treasure; looking for the famous salt pan where, says the legend, diamonds can be shoveled up by the hundreds; digging, "babying," washing; meeting a thousand disappointments but never losing hope.

All these things had left their mark on Peg Sanders. Had grayed his hair, dimmed his eyes, thinned his blood. Had made him antisocial; a man who lived for and by himself.

But now, after seven years, he was heading for the British police post on the borders of Great Namaqualand. He was



A Complete Novelette

leaving the desert behind him—*for good.* He was going out. And he was going to live the life for which he had so long worked and planned. Although he had not located the Bushman's Treasure—that still remains a prize for some lucky prospector—he had, in the course of his wanderings, picked up enough stones to enable him to live in luxury for the rest of his life.

So he was leaving the Great Thirst. He considered himself already out of it, inasmuch as his business with it was finished. But it was still there, still a menace, although, just ahead of him, fluttered the flags of two great civilized powers: the flag of the British police post at Nakop and, just across the boundary river, the flag which floated over the German outpost.

IT WAS high noon when Peg Sanders came to Nakop. A young trooper of the South African Mounted Rifles—a powerfully built, stolid, slow thinking Afrikander—greeted him effusively, insisting on his visitor sitting down and taking things easy while he, Trooper van Reenan, unsaddled the mule and prepared *skoff*.

"You'll find whisky inside, ma-an," he said clipping his vowels in a way peculiar to the Afrikander. "And water—if you want it."

"I don't," Sanders said with a harsh laugh. "I run a camel a close second when it comes to drinking water. But whisky. . . ."

He went into the mess hut and poured himself out a stiff drink.

Ten minutes later the two men sat down to a hastily prepared meal. For a time they were silent. Sanders' silence was desert born; the policeman's born of necessity. He could not talk and eat.

"*Sis!*" he exclaimed presently, pushing back his chair with a sigh of repletion. "I'm glad to see you, ma-an."

Sanders' eyebrows, sun bleached white, raised questioningly.

"I am alone, you see," Van Reenan explained awkwardly.

"Hell," Sanders jeered. "That's hard on you. An' you mean to say they put a younker like you alone in charge of this important post?"

Van Reenan flushed at the sarcasm.

"The other two have gone to headquarters at Upington with a prisoner. Five days ago they went. An' it's *verdoemte* lonely, ma-an, I tell you."

"Five days!" Sanders laughed, thinking of the months he had been alone—really alone. "But you got them others to talk to," he continued, and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the German camp across the border. "They're your sort, too. Same hoggish breed."

Van Reenan choked back a rising flood of wrath.

"You do not know what you are talking about, Englisher," he said quietly. "And the desert has burned away your courtesy."

"I never had any," Sanders laughed, but he looked at the young Boer with renewed interest.

"It is those others," Van Reenan continued, and he, too, indicated the German camp, "who make it hard for me. They—" He hesitated, unable properly to express himself.

"You mean they've been bullying you?" Sanders said. "My God! You look big enough to eat a dozen. Besides—you've a gun, haven't you? All right! Warn 'em that if they cross the border you'll blow their heads off. Give 'em plenty of iron fist talk. They understand that. An' they won't trouble you once they see you mean it."

Van Reenan looked puzzled.

"You still don't understand," he said. "Perhaps it is because my English is not too good. I talk slowly and hear slowly. Do you speak the Taal?"

Sanders nodded and Van Reenan continued, speaking swiftly now that he was using his mother tongue:

"That is good. Now I can make myself understood. If those slim devils across the river threatened me I should know how to deal with them. *Ja vrachtig!* But that is not it, no. They speak softly to me. Their commandant has come to visit me every day since I have been alone. He brings presents—that whisky you drank—and wants me to be his great friend. He wants more than that. He wants me to join under his flag. He tells me of many of my own people who are only waiting the word to rise up and throw off the English rule. And I know that that is true. Only there are not so many of them as the commandant thinks. And he talks of a war soon to be."

Sanders' eyes narrowed.

"You mean between the Germans and the English?"

"*Ja!*" Van Reenan nodded emphatically. "So consider my position. I am a British subject. I wear the king's uniform. And though some of my people—hot-headed fools who think a wrong has been done them—would be glad to see England in trouble and would help to add to that trouble, most of us are loyal. *Ja!*

"I do not like those slim ones across the river to come to me with offers of friendship. It is as if they threw mud on me. I do not trust them. And when war comes, they will know long before I can know. They have a telegraph. There are two hundred of them. I am alone. At least," he amended, "I was alone until you came."

"Don't count me in," Sanders said with a roar of laughter. "Me! I'm no fighter. I'm a man of peace. Every time. If war breaks out, I'm goin' back into the desert. It's civilized there. But you're talking fool words, Van Reenan. War? Of course there won't be a war."

"There will be," Van Reenan insisted quietly. "They have been preparing for it. I know. I have scouted over there, a long way in from the interior. I disobeyed regulations, but I wanted to know. And when I sent in my report to the captain at Upington, he fined me three days' pay! But I saw what I saw. They have railway lines over there which are not shown on their maps. There are blockhouses and gun emplacements . . .

"And, now, Hottentots are crossing the border. They know, too. And they know what happens when the Germans go to war. Almighty! I helped my father drive transport for the Germans in the 1903 affair. Ma-an! That was slaughter, I tell you.

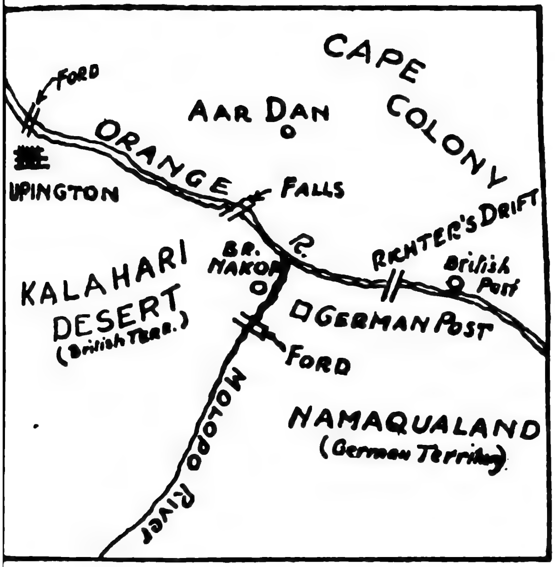
"And the police who were on duty over there—they have been moved. They were too friendly with us. Good fellows, they were. We used to hunt together and ride the boundary patrol together. But the men who are there now. *Ach sis!* They are soldiers, regulars, new out from Germany. And they are pigs. They must have been recruited from the prisons. You should see how they thrash their niggers! Some have escaped over here and I have dressed their wounds. Almighty! One knows that even a good nigger is made better by a taste of the *sjambok*. But there is a limit.

"And so, I have been waiting here, alone, watching the ford, waiting for the shot which means war and death."

"You're crazy, Van Reenan," Sanders exclaimed. "And, anyway, if war does break out—and it won't—they'll write you a note about it and ask you to surrender. You'll do it, and that'll be the end of it. Nothing for you to worry about."

"I shall not surrender," Van Reenan said quietly, "even were there a thousand of them. This post is important—although the captain at Upington thinks differently. Look!"

He emptied some salt on the table and, using his stubby forefinger, made of it a relief map of the district.



"You see," he explained, "because of the hills back of this camp, it commands the ford. *Ja vrachtig!* It commands, too, the German camp and the way to Upington. And at Upington there are only twenty men to guard the ford there. You see!"

"What of it?" Sanders commented casually. "It isn't likely the Germans'd march a hundred miles through the desert to the ford at Upington when they could cross at Richter's Drift, less than sixty miles from their railhead."

Van Reenan spat his contempt.

"*Ach!* You English!" he exclaimed. "What fools. You say, 'This is the best thing for the enemy to do, therefore, this is what he will do.' And you prepare cleverly, so veree cleverly, to meet it. *Ja!* There is a big post at Richter's Drift. They have machine guns and twelve pounders. They could make it difficult for a very big force to cross there. So, I say: The Germans will go to the ford at Upington. So, I say further: They must not cross this one."

"And you, alone, think to stop them?"

"Alone—if I have to. At least I mean to try. Four or five will not live to reach Upington. It is the best I can do. If you help——"

"Me help!" Sanders interrupted. "Don't be a fool, Van Reenan. If there's any truth in your talk of war, I'm going back into the desert. And you had better come with me, or surrender—or anything you damned please."

He rose abruptly to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Van Reenan asked.

"Me? I'm going over to have a talk with your friend the commandant. Does Nobby Clark still keep store there?"

"Yah! You and him make a pair. He ran away from the British Army in 1899. Deserted under fire. He doesn't dare cross the river. Go and join him. Two rats together!"

Sanders scowled.

"Don't try to be funny with me, Van Reenan. I've told you I don't intend to mix up in any fighting. But it's your job. You're paid to protect me, see? S'long!" He touched his forelock in a mocking gesture and slouched out of the door.

PEG SANDERS looked inquisitively at the man who, a deserter from the British Army at the time of the Boer War, now kept store in alien territory.

He was short and unhealthily pale. His cheeks were flabby. His mouse colored hair, parted in the center, was slicked down with strong scented pomade and draped down over his forehead in two curled fringes.

"You've got a nice place here," Sanders commented and indicated, with a careless wave of his hand, the large well stocked storeroom. It was lighted by an oil lamp which hung on a gilt chain from a beam in the ceiling. Tables and chairs were set about the floor. A bar ran across one end of the room; the shelves behind it were stocked with bottles. And there the two men now sat.

"Yes," Nobby Clark said listlessly. "It's a nice place an' hi've made a lot of 'oof." The cockney twang persisted despite the years of exile.

"What's the matter? You don't look happy, and that's a fact."

" 'Appy! I've been livin' the life of a dawg this past month, ever since this new lot come. Course the others, at times, got a little nasty wiv me. But they was good fellers at the bottom. But these swine! I'd 'ook it if I could find a w'y of gettin' somewhere safe." He shrugged his shoulders. "But you'll find hout all abart it if yer stay 'ere. Hif you take my tip, you'll clear hout w'ile the goin's good."

"They won't bother me, Nobby," Sanders said easily. "I've been with their commandant all the afternoon. I'm glad I remembered my German. He's a good sort. Me and him understand each other all right. I told him all about myself."

"I bet yer didn't tell 'im abart that hide-'ole in yer cork leg where yer keep yer revolver an' diamonds."

"No," Sanders replied slowly. "And it 'ud be a good thing if you, Nobby, forgot all about it. See?"

There was a threat in his voice and Nobby was quick with assurances of loyalty and vows that he would not squeal on a pal.

Sanders waved the apologies aside.

"Then, that's that," he said. "But about the commandant. You'd be surprised at the questions he asked me and the way I answered them."

"You mean you told 'im wot 'e wanted to know?" Nobby said accusingly.

"Just that."

"Well, strike me pink if I thought you'd do a think like that. 'Aven't you tumbled to the fact that there's bloody crimson war on the 'orizon? That's a fact! Say, I could earn a lot of money if I'd only cross over the other side an' keep my eyes open fer 'em. Maybe I'd do it, too . . . Only—only it ain't so safe fer me over there. The bloomin' Army authorities 'ave long memories, blast 'em. Still——"

Nobby Clark broke off with an exclamation of alarm at the sound of men's voices outside.

" 'Ere they come," he muttered to Sanders. "You'll see wot I 'ave to put up with. You take a drink an' go an' sit down in the corner there. An' keep quiet, you will, hif you're wise."

"They won't touch me," Sanders said confidently.

Nevertheless, he took the drink Nobby poured out for him and went to the corner Nobby had indicated. Here, the light from the hanging lamp barely reached him.

The door was thrown violently open and a number of German troopers, clad in long, blue-gray greatcoats, entered.

Lining up at the bar they shouted orders at Nobby, cursing him because he did not move quick enough to please them. And he, sychophantically polite and meek, pulled corks, poured out drinks and laughed heartily at the coarse jokes they made at his expense. He even laughed when one man emptied dregs of beer in his face.

Peg Sanders, watching it all from his corner, hardly knew whether he despised Clark or the troopers most. He realized, of course, that the troopers were no more representative Germans than Nobby was a representative Englishman. Then he considered his own conduct and felt less entitled to pass judgment.

Presently the troopers carried their drink to the tables, seated themselves and played *scart.*

"They let me off heasy tonight," Nobby said, joining Sanders. "But there's worse ter come. You wait till their officer comes in. 'E alwus does. He's a blighter! They say e's a big bug wot got kicked hout of the Court fer some dirty business. 'E was exiled to this God fersaken 'ole an' put in charge of a lot of muckers like 'imself."

"If you had the pluck of a louse," Peg Sanders said, "you wouldn't let 'em treat you like a dog."

"Yes? Is that so? An' wot would you do, may I ask?"

Sanders shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh—what you're doing, most likely," he said bitterly.

"Blimme!" Nobby exclaimed. "I'm 'anged if I don't think you're a worse mucker than wot I am. Look here. Wy don't them Dutchies make fun of you? I know. You're a bloomin' spy fer 'em, that's wot." He spat contemptuously.

"Don't be a fool," Sanders snapped. "There's no war. There's no harm in giving officials of a friendly power information regarding fords and so on. My God!—As a matter of fact they know our territory over there better than our people do. Their maps are thorough. Ours are just pretty colored patchwork pictures which don't mean a damn an' only guess at information. But there's one thing they don't know. And

I'm the only man alive who does know. And that's a way to cross the Orange, just above the falls. Now, I'm a man of peace, Nobby. I ask nothin' save a right to live an' enjoy what I've made the desert give me. So, if war breaks out, I am going back into the desert. And I'll come out when it's all over and say: 'What? There's been a war?' And I'll be alive, Nobby."

The door opened again and an officer entered.

His bullet shaped head, the hair close shaved, looked repulsively bald. The fatness of his neck bulged over his high, stiff collar. His nose—it had been broken in a drunken affray and badly set—was flabby and looked negroid. His lips were thin, vicious.

He walked arrogantly up to the bar, swinging a *sjambok* in his right hand; a monocle in his left eye.

Those two things—the monocle and the *sjambok*—symbolized the man's complex personality. The swaggering bully, coarse living, foul mouthed; and the effete degenerate.

He brought down his *sjambok* on the bar with a riflelike report, laughing as Nobby, who had left Sanders in order to wait on the lieutenant, jumped nervously.

"You see," he bellowed, appealing to his men, "the swine is gun-shy. You will find them all the same."

He tossed down the drink Nobby had poured out for him. A second quickly followed the first. A third, fourth, fifth. . . .

The lieutenant's face was flushed, his eyes bloodshot; the muscles of his face worked spasmodically and he had difficulty in retaining his monocle.

He talked continuously, reviling, in the speech of the sewers, the rats who called themselves English. The troopers cheered him to further extravagances. They pounded their flagons on the tables.

"God—these swine!" the lieutenant concluded. "These filthy swine who call themselves empire builders. But the day is at hand when we Germans will put them in their styes. So, come! A toast."

He raised his glass aloft. The men sprang to their feet. Their heels clicked together. For a moment, as they stood there in motionless silence, a light of patriotism lent dignity to their crime scarred faces.

Then a man hiccoughed drunkenly and the solemnity of the moment passed. Loud laughter drowned the lieutenant's shouts: *"Der Tag!"*

The troopers sat down again, looking at each other uneasily. They were conscious that their laughter had been akin to blasphemy.

But the lieutenant had turned his back on them and was glaring fiercely at Nobby whom he had surprised grinning—grinning because the troopers had laughed.

"Come here, you swine!" the lieutenant snarled, and grabbing Nobby by the scruff of the neck he dragged him over the bar counter.

He beckoned to the troopers and they, rising, formed a ring around the two men, grinning in joyful anticipation.

"This swine," the lieutenant said softly, "dared to laugh at our toast. He is perhaps mad. But I can cure madness."

He gave an order to one of the men and he, clambering over the counter, concocted a vile drink: lamp oil and the sudsy greasy water in which Nobby had washed down his counter formed two of the ingredients. This mixture the man put into an almost empty tin of saddle soap and handed it to his lieutenant.

"You did not like my toast," said the lieutenant. "Now you shall propose one—and drink it. I am magnanimous. I permit you to drink to your country, your king and your dirty flag. A good German has mixed the wine for you. So drink, you swine!"

He held the can out towards Clark.

"Take it," he said and flicked the man about the legs with his *sjambok*.

Clark's face was very white. His lips moved but no sound came from them.

Peg Sanders, unnoticed in the corner of the room, was fumbling with his cork leg.

The troopers, taking their cue from the lieutenant, were jeering Nobby, spitting at him.

"Take it!" The harsh order was accompanied by another blow from the *sjambok*. The lash wrapped round Clark's thighs, cutting into his flesh.

Nobby held out his hands and took the can, his face averted.

"Drink!" Lieutenant von Essen commanded.

The troopers nudged each other, laughing until the tears ran down their cheeks.

Nobby's head jerked round and he looked full into Von Essen's face.

"We're waiting," that man said and bowed with elaborate courtesy. He put his monocle in his eye, grimacing open mouthed in his effort to fix it securely.

"Then 'ave a drink, you skunk!" Nobby yelled, flinging can and contents into Von Essen's face.

There was a moment's deadly silence and, before the troopers could move to avenge the insult or the lieutenant shout an order, a shot sounded and the lamp went out, plunging the place into darkness.

There was a confused turmoil; cursing, falling men; and intermittent flashes of light as some of the troopers struck matches.

"Run Nobby," a voice shouted.

The door opened.

"Yah! Swines yourself!" the storekeeper shouted derisively. "An' I 'opes yer like the toast." The door closed with a bang.

"After him!" Von Essen shouted.

The door opened again and the troopers rushed out of the darkened room into the greater darkness of the night.

In the store, all was silent save for the cursing and gagging noises of the lieutenant.

PRESENTLY there was a flare of a match and Peg Sanders, shielding the flame between his cupped hands, climbed over the counter and lighted a candle which he stuck on the counter.

He looked at the lieutenant who was mopping his face with his handkerchief.

"Better have a drink," he said and pushed a bottle of whisky toward the lieutenant.

Von Essen looked up, scowling furiously.

"I'll cut the swine to pieces," he said slowly.

He took up the bottle, rinsed his mouth out, then drank deeply.

His color returned and with it the self-assurance Clark's act had destroyed.

"And, also, I must deal with you. It was you who shot down the lamp. It was you who told him to run."

"I told him to run, yes, lieutenant. But the shooting . . . As you see, I am unarmed."

Sanders grinned confidently. He had heard the measured tread of men outside, heard them come to a halt in obedience to a low voice—a voice he recognized as the commandant's.

And now the commandant entered. He was a man of nearly sixty; a big man, well preserved. It was evident that he was the sort of man who had been made a soldier in spite of himself; a man who preferred the professions of peace to those of war; a kindly man with a sense of humor. But his face was very stern now as he looked at his second in command.

Von Essen drew himself erect and made an attempt to cover the stains on his tunic. He swayed and grinned fatuously.

"What does this mean, Von Essen?" the commandant demanded. "We thought we had been attacked. That—" He broke off and looked at Sanders. "I wait for your reply," he concluded.

"It was only that the swine of a storekeeper went mad and threw a pot of beer in my face, sir," Von Essen replied sullenly. "Then he, or this man, shot out the lamp and escaped. The troopers are now searching for him."

"Lies, of course," the commandant snapped. "The truth, more likely, is that you were drinking here with your men, to the detriment of discipline, and baiting that poor rat of a storekeeper until he turned on you in self-defense. I've warned you twice about your conduct. This is the third and last time. Now get your men together. And I shall hold *you* responsible if he comes to harm."

Von Essen saluted and quickly left the store, glad to have escaped so easily.

The commandant turned to Sanders.

"And we Germans," he said slowly, "will all be condemned because of men like that." He shrugged his shoulders. "But you, Herr Sanders. What are your plans?"

"I am going back to the desert as fast as I can."

"I'm almost inclined to think," the commandant said with a laugh, "that you are very brave in your avowal of cowardice. But why risk the perils of the desert?"

"I know what they are. I can face them. But war . . ." Sanders shivered. "After what you've told me! It'll be hell on earth. If I must die——"

"One way is as good as another. No. I am wrong. One way is best of all: to die for one's country."

"I prefer to live, for myself," Sanders sneered. "Money's no good when you're dead but it'll buy you a damned good time when you're alive."

"In spite of memories? In spite of a conscience which tells you you've played an ignoble part?"

"Oh, that's bosh," Sanders said roughly. "Conscience is another name for 'the fear of being found out.' And that doesn't touch me. I'm a noncombatant, a neutral. And there's an end to it."

The commandant shook his head.

"I'm doubtful about you, Herr Sanders," he said. "You talk like a coward and yet——"

He turned away, ignoring Sanders' outstretched hand.

At the doorway he paused.

"You have given me useful information," he said. "So, I will instruct two of my men to escort you to the ford. If you are wise, you will lose no time in getting away. Once the storm breaks, you may be overtaken by the river's flood!"

He passed outside. Sanders heard him give an order; heard him, and his escort, return to the barrack quarters. But two men, Bavarians like their commander, stood in the doorway, waiting to escort Sanders over the border. He poured himself a stiff drink of whisky, drank it thoughtfully, then limped slowly toward the door.

THREE men sat on the peak of a steep kopje at the back of the British post at Nakop and stared moodily before them.

The sun was directly overhead, the heat intense, the granite rock of the kopje felt molten hot to the touch.

On the far western horizon a jagged line of fantastic looking hills were starkly silhouetted against the dazzling blue of the sky. They shimmered in the heat waves.

But the beauty of the African landscape had no appeal for these three men. Their eyes were focused on the German camp, plainly visible across the Molopo River. Or, if not there, then on each other.

Evidently they were distrustful of each other.

"I can't understand you," Van Reenan said suddenly. "Why do you stay here, Sanders? You speak of saving your skin. Yet you know that, once war's declared and the Germans take it into their heads to attack, we're finished. Why do you stay—if it is not that you are waiting to play me a slim trick?"

"You don't know, Van Reenan," Sanders replied with a short laugh. "That's the joke of it. And I'm hanged if I know why I stay."

"Say," Nobby Clark put it. "Wot's the truth abart yer, Sanders? I knows that hif it 'adn't 'a' bin for you the other night that bloody Von Essen would have killed me. Well, w'y did yer do it? Ter pull wool over my heyes, er wot?"

"Why, as to that," Peg Sanders replied lightly, "I'm not going to say. Your record is not one to create trust, is it? You deserted under fire once. You've been livin' over there with them. How do I know that that affair the other night wasn't a put up job between you and Von Essen? A plan that'd make it possible for you to come over here and play some dirty game?"

"My God!" Nobby sprang to his feet. "You'll take that back or . . . I ain't," he finished lamely. "I'll give yer my word of honor I'm on the square."

There was silence again.

They could see men busily loading wagons at the camp over the river. Others were drilling, practicing skirmishing in extended order. A burst of rapid firing split the silence.

Van Reenan started nervously.

"Ach sis!" he exclaimed. "They have many machine guns."

"And you, with a rifle, alone," Sanders said sarcastically, "think you can stop them when they want to cross. Don't be a fool. Chuck it up before it's too late and come back into the desert with me. Come on."

"No."

"I'll tell yer w'y 'e won't," Nobby Clark said. "He's agoin' to join them. That's wot. This talk of loyalty don't go down wiv me. He——"

His voice ended in a gurgle. Van Reenan's big hand was at his throat.

"You dirty rat," Van Reenan roared, then he released his hold, pushing Nobby Clark away from him with such force that the cockney sprawled over backward.

"Almighty! This is funny," the big Boer continued with a bitter laugh. "We three sit here like three suspicious old *vrows*. Maybe we are all traitors—or all loyal. All cowards—or all heroes. And maybe no one will ever find out the truth—except ourselves, if we live."

He rose to his feet and lurched down the hill, vanishing presently behind a projecting spur of rock.

Sanders then said quietly:

"War's been declared, Nobby."

Clark looked up morosely.

"How did you know?" he growled.

"That nigger who came in yesterday at sundown brought the news to Van Reenan from Upington. War was declared a week ago."

"Wot yer giving me?" Nobby scoffed. "War declared. Hell! If that's so, w'y ain't them blokes over there doin' something abart it?"

"They're waiting for word from a crowd of back veld Boers, half-castes and Hottentots who are mustering at Aar Pan across the river. As soon as they hear that crowd's going to join them they'll be taking rifles and ammunition to them. They'll join forces and raise hell down through Cape Colony."

"Ow! Don't talk like a bleedin' fool. Germans are white men. They ain't goin' to arm a lot of niggers against folk of their own color."

"Why not? War's war, isn't it? A bullet doesn't hit you any softer fired by a white man than a black, does it?"

"No, but—" Nobby spluttered. "Think of 'ow the niggers'll act when they get goin'. Ow, 'ell! I ain't goin' ter think abart it." He straightened himself and glared savagely at Sanders. "Wot are you goin ter do abart all this? An' 'oo told you?"

"I've told you plenty of times. I'm goin' to hide up till it's all over. I've suffered hell for what I've got and I'm goin' to live to enjoy it. I know what I know because I had a talk with the nigger who brought Van Reenan the news. I also managed to get a look at Van's official instructions. He's got to hold this post and they can't send him any reinforcements. Damned silly, isn't it, to expect one man to stop a couple of hundred?

"Tonight I'm goin' to leave and, if you're a wise man, you'll come with me."

"There are times," Nobby Clark snorted indignantly, "when I'd rather be a bloody fool. And this is one of them."

"Well, what are you going to do. Commit suicide? Might just as well as try to hold the ford."

"Me?" Nobby Clark exclaimed. "I'm goin' ter 'ave a talk wiv Van Reenan. I'm gon' ter find hout from 'im if war's really been declared."

"And if it is?"

"You'll soon find out," Nobby replied grimly and set off at a run down the hill.

FOR a long time Sanders did not move from his position on top of the kopje, but sat hunched up, gazing vacantly before him.

"Damn fools," he muttered, thinking of Van Reenan and Clark.

He ran his hand up and down his artificial leg. He patted it gently and an expression of avarice distorted his face. That leg was his safety deposit vault.

"They'll be movin' at sundown tonight," he mused, thinking now of the Germans. "God! What a stupid business. And if Van Reenan kills a few and manages to escape, he'll get a medal. He'll be called a hero for doin' something he'd have been hanged for a week ago. Well, I'm no hero. I'm going to leave, now, at once."

Still, he did not move but sat there broodingly for a full hour.

"It's funny about Clark — and Van Reenan, too." He was giving final expression to the thoughts which had been engrossing him. "It's as if they've been caught in some strong current—'specially Nobby—which is sweeping them into a course of action foreign to their natures. Van Reenan, now. He was trained in the shoot-and-run style of fighting; yet he's prepared to wait here for sure death. Nobby Clark, a proved coward, filling a hero's rôle. It is funny. And me . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "I've got to get out of the current before it traps me."

Three shots sounded in quick succession. Looking up with an exclamation of alarm, he saw the Germans who had been engaged loading a wagon run to cover. Another shot sounded and one man fell. Then silence. The German camp seemed deserted. There was no sign of life or movement.

"The damned fools," Sanders exclaimed and he, too, made his way down the hill.

He reached the police camp, breathless, in time to see Nobby Clark and Van Reenan rolling over and over on the ground, locked together in grim combat. Save for an occasional grunt and gasped curses they fought in deadly silence.

A service rifle lay on the ground not far away. Sanders picked it up and worked the bolt, loading the chamber. Leaning against the wall of the hut, he watched the furious struggle, an amused smile on his face. Presently the smile was replaced by a frown. The cockney was sprawling helplessly on his back and the policeman, sitting astride him, gripping him with his knees, was compressing his big hands about Nobby's neck. Sanders rushed over to them.

"Let him get up, you fool," he shouted, prodding Van Reenan with the rifle.

"I'm going to kill the *verdoemte* rat," the Boer said wrathfully, but, nevertheless, his hands relaxed their grip sufficiently for Nobby to pant:

"The blighter's gone mad. He—"

"Let him go, Van Reenan," Sanders said curtly. "Get up, both of you, and let's hear what this is all about."

"Almighty!" the policeman growled as he obeyed, glowering at Nobby who, scrambling to his feet, gulped painfully and massaged his throat, mumbling:

"The bleedin' fool nearly choked me."

"What's it all about, Van Reenan?" Sanders asked. "You keep quiet, Nobby."

"Almighty! Listen ma-an. This slim devil rushes up to me and says: 'Is there war, Van Reenan? Has war been declared?' And, because he asked so suddenly, I forgot that there might be need for caution; forgot that he might be a spy. So, 'Yes,' I tell him. And then he runs into the hut and takes my rifle and goes down there a little way with it. Before I could stop him he fired three shots quickly, then another. Of course, it was a signal."

"You damn fool," Nobby exploded. "Signal me heye! War's on, ain't it? Well—war's war, an' if yer think I was agoin' ter stay 'ere, doin' nothin', w'itin' fer them devils to come an' get me, yer got another think comin'. I fired the first three shots as a sort o' warning. The next one," he smiled grimly, "was a bull's eye, right on the bloomin' target. I was a marksman in the hold days an' I ain't forgot 'ow to 'old a rifle. There is one Dutchy the less an'," he turned savagely on Van Reenan, "there'd be one er two more wouldn't 'ave lived to see the Day o' Judgment if you 'adn't interfered, you bloomin' Dutch rebel."

Van Reenan ignored the insult. He was looking wonderingly at Nobby, not quite convinced that the man's story was true.

"He's telling the truth," Sanders assured him. "I heard his shots and I saw where the first three hit. He dropped one man with his fourth."

"I wish it 'ad been that mucker Von Essen," Nobby said.

Van Reenan held out his hand in a gesture of apology and comradeship.

"I'm sorry, ma-an," he said simply. "I did not understand. I hope I did not hurt you."

"You did. But that don't matter now." Nobby shook the other's hand, then dropped it hastily as if ashamed at the show of sentiment. "Well—what are us a-goin' ter do now, Van?"

He and the policeman had moved closer together. Their attitude was one of distrust of Sanders. Yet it was that man who now took charge of the situation.

"How many rifles in camp, Van Reenan?"

"Two. Mine and one other."

"No other weapons?"

"A revolver, that is all."

"No dynamite?"

"No."

"And you haven't any guns, have you, Nobby?"

"Not nothin' 'cept me fists."

"A hell of a lot of good they are," Sanders commented tersely, "against machine guns and rifles. Well—I've only got a revolver." He laughed shortly. "It's a hell of a mess, isn't it? And you still think you can stop them from crossing, Van Reenan, with two rifles, two revolvers and Nobby's fists?"

Van Reenan shook his head.

"No. I do not think that. But if I can delay them even for a little while, I shall have done what I am asked to do."

"Even if Nobby and I left, you would stay?"

"Of course."

"You bleedin' fool!" Nobby exclaimed, but there was a note of admiration in his voice. It is a compliment, at times, to be called a fool.

Sanders sighed.

"Well, Nobby, are you coming with me? Into the desert?"

"No bloomin' fear. I'm stayin' 'ere with Van. Ain't you?"

"Why should I? I want to live, an' by God, I'm going to live. You're fools, both of you. You can't stop them from crossing. You won't hinder them more than two or three minutes. You can only die."

"There's worse things than dying," Nobby replied bitterly, but his face seemed harder, cleaner. "I knows. I been learnin' a 'ard lesson ever since, like a bloomin' cur, I ran from death fourteen years ago. A 'ard lesson—but I've learnt it." His conclusion was triumphant.

The three men were silent for a while, each occupied with his thoughts.

Sanders moved morosely. He was inwardly reproaching himself for the soft sentiment which embogged him. Reason—cold, calculating reason—told him to get away from the place while there was still time. Yet he made no signs of leaving.

"I suppose," he mused bitterly, "I'll stay and die with the other two fools. And it's so damned silly. We'll have achieved not a thing. But there you are!" He shrugged his shoulders. It was a gesture of resignation. The river had risen within him. It had trapped him as surely as it had trapped Nobby Clark. He struggled against it.

"I'll see you in hell, Nobby, before I throw away my life needlessly!" he exclaimed.

The other two looked at him coldly.

OVERHEAD the sun beat down upon them with fearful force. The river, the boundary river, hemmed in by unclimbable banks save at the ford, dazzlingly reflected the molten rays. Nothing moved.

"I don't understand," Van Reenan said. "Why do they not attack us?" He took his rifle from Sanders and played absently with the cut-off.

Nobby Clark stirred himself.

"Where's the other rifle, Van, and cartridges?" he asked.

"Come with me, ma-an."

The two entered Van Reenan's sleeping hut. When they came out again Nobby Clark was wearing one of the big Boer's tunics. He had turned up the sleeves; it flapped loosely about his chest. On his head was a slouch hat, pinned up one side with the insignia of the Corps. Unconscious of his ludicrous appearance, Clark's face shone with pride. He was a soldier once again. He carried a rifle at the trail. Both men wore bandoleers, the pouches carrying cartridges in clips of five.

Sanders rose as they approached. It was a gesture of respect.

"Look!" Nobby exclaimed. "The blighters are goin' ter surrender."

Two men were coming down to the river bank opposite. One carried a white flag. The other, the commandant of the post, a megaphone.

"As you know," he shouted, "war has been declared between your country and mine. We have a duty to perform. You, yours; I, mine. But my duty does not require me to wantonly kill brave men; neither can your duty require you to needlessly sacrifice your lives. So, I call upon you to surrender."

"What's he say?" Van Reenan asked.

"He's giving you an honorable way out," Sanders said. "He wants you to surrender."

" 'E's a bleedin' gentleman," added Nobby. "But tell 'im to go to 'ell, Van."

Sanders, still struggling to escape, said:

"I'm going to tell him we surrender."

He put his cupped hands to his mouth, making a megaphone of them, and shouted:

"We agree to——"

But before he could get any further the other two had jumped on him, Van Reenan's big hand closing his mouth. They carried him, struggling, to one of the huts and flung him inside and closed the door on him, locking it.

He heard Van Reenan shout:

"We do not surrender."

And the commandant's reply:

"I am sorry. In ten minutes we open fire."

Sanders rose to his feet and looked out through a wide crack in the door. The Germans were returning to their camp. Nobby Clark and Van Reenan were hastily building a firing shelter with the whitewashed boulders which were piled in a circular heap at the foot of the flagpole.

"Look here, you two," Sanders called. "Get to the hills while you have time. Waiting here, the chances are you won't see a German to fire at."

A contemptuous silence answered him.

"I tell you," he continued desperately, "I have a plan which will stop the Germans from getting to Upington. Or, maybe, anywhere else. You get to the hills an' leave me to deal with them."

"Oh, shut up," Nobby exclaimed. "You're a lousy noncombatant. You've told us that enough times. Leave alone us men 'oo will fight. As hif we'd leave you to deal wiv 'em! Is it likely?"

Nobby said something to Van Reenan which Sanders could not hear. But, judging by the roars of laughter which followed, he guessed that the cockney had been witty at his expense. He tried again to get them to listen to him, but without success.

"Maybe it's just as well," he muttered.

He prowled round the hut, coming to a

halt for a minute at the window at the rear. The hills loomed up invitingly. And beyond was the desert. *There* was safety.

He opened the window wide, hesitated a moment then turned his back on it, swearing. A pair of handcuffs hanging on the wall attracted his attention. He took them down and fastened them—they were self-locking—about his wrists. Then he went to the door again and peered through the chink.

"That ought to be enough, ma-an," the Dutchman was saying. He was inspecting the boulder shelter they had built with an air of pride.

"It needs another one 'ere, Van, old man," Nobby answered. "I'll get one. You keep yer bloomin' heyes peeled fer the blinkin' enemy. An' get hunder cover."

The policeman crouched down behind the wall of boulders. Nobby, whistling shrilly, waved a derisive reply to Sanders' shouted word of caution and strolled nonchalantly over to the flagstaff. He was covered from head to foot with whitening from the stones; his tunic flapped about him; his slouch hat teetered precariously on the back of his head. He was ludicrous. Yet something that was infinitely fine manifested itself.

As he stooped to pick up a boulder, a burst of machine gun fire shattered the silence.

"Quick man!" Van Reenan urged.

Vicious spurts of dust appeared, springing up from the ground about twenty feet from where Nobby stooped. They moved nearer, nearer.

Nobby's whistle ceased abruptly. He jerked erect, holding a good sized boulder in his hands, and, turning, walked unsteadily to where Van Reenan watched anxiously. Bullets whined through the air. Van Reenan searched for the place of their origin—and searched in vain. Nobby's face was curiously set and strained.

"I think—Van," he said unevenly as he neared, "that this'll—make everything—square an' shipshape."

Then he whirled round as if caught in some invisible but powerful eddy. The boulder slipped from his hands, its whiteness now streaked with crimson. And Nobby fell, having, at last, turned to meet the death from which he had run fourteen years ago.

Van Reenan climbed over the boulders, intending to carry Nobby back under cover. The next moment he was sprawling lifelessly on the ground.

"The fools!" Sanders said softly. But his eyes glistened; his voice was a requiem.

The firing continued and the bodies of the two men jerked horribly at the impact of the leaden hail. Then the hidden guns played on a new target. Bullets richocheted with an unclean *whee-ang;* splinters flew from the flagstaff and presently it fell, cut in two. Loud cheering sounded across the river. The firing ceased. A period of silence followed.

SANDERS walked again to the open window. But, somehow, the black hills now looked menacing and hemmed him in.

He returned to the chink in the door.

A troop of soldiers was riding down to the ford. After them came a wagon, drawn by mules; then other soldiers. They moved silently, efficiently.

The ford crossing was free from incident and the main body passed on along the road leading to Upington, but a party of horsemen rode up to the camp. As they neared, Sanders saw that it was the commandant, escorted by twelve troopers.

They dismounted close to the bodies of Nobby Clark and Van Reenan and, after covering them with the flag they took from the flagstaff, heaped white boulders upon them.

Sanders now climbed out of the window and ran around the hut, approaching the commandant with his hands raised above his head.

"The fools!" he said with a laugh. "They shut me in the hut, but there was a window . . . If you will order your men to knock these handcuffs off, Herr Commandant . . ." He lowered his hands as he spoke.

"It is a pity, Herr Sanders," the commandant said coldly, "that you delayed your return to your refuge in the desert. I am not sure what to do with you."

"Why should you do anything? Tell your men to release me and let me go."

The commandant shook his head.

"No. That I cannot do. You are an enemy. It is possible that you might do us an injury. It would have been easier for us all if you had followed the example those other two set you. The flag was big enough to have covered you, too. They were brave men . . ."

"But fools!" Sanders exclaimed.

"Possibly. But are *you* so very wise, Herr Sanders?"

"They are dead; I am alive," Sanders replied glibly.

"And that proves—what? Exactly nothing." The commandant hesitated a moment, stroking his chin reflectively. "I am not sure in my mind about you. I think, perhaps, I ought to shoot you. But that I do not care to do. No. So you shall accompany me as a guide to Upington—and beyond. You will be very useful. But, please observe, I am not using compulsion. If you refuse to act as our guide—" he waved his hands—"things shall be just as they were."

He laughed softly.

"You mean?" Sanders asked.

"Why, we shall put you in another hut, making sure that there is no way for you to escape, and leave you there."

"But that would be worse than murder. Besides—*they* left the window open."

"That was an oversight on their part. As for the rest—your own countrymen handcuffed you and locked you up. Doubtless you are a dangerous criminal. I do not think it is my place to release you. Well, what do you say?"

Sanders shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, I will guide you. I want to live. But why do you go to Upington?"

"Because we want to cross the Orange into Cape Colony. The other ford is securely guarded."

"So is the ford at Upington." He continued swiftly as the commandant laughed: "Oh, I know there are only twenty or thirty men there. But they could cause you trouble. They will be expecting you; they will be under cover; and your men will have to attack after a long, thirsty trek across the desert. And when you have gained the ford, you may find yourself facing another force from—say—Richter's Drift. And here's another thing: The natives and half-castes and rebel Boers, to whom you are taking guns and ammunition at Aar Pan, may have got tired of waiting and surrendered."

"I wish they would," the commandant said heavily. "To arm niggers and turn them loose against defenseless whites is devil's work. But orders——"

He checked himself abruptly, continuing: "You know too much, Herr Sanders. But why do you make all these objections to my march on Upington?"

"Because I can show you a quicker and safer way to the Colony. I can take you over the river and you will not lose a man if my instructions are obeyed to the letter."

"And where is this crossing?"

"Just above the falls."

The commandant started.

"Impossible. Our maps do not show a crossing there. It is impossible that there should be one."

"There is, when the river is very low as it is now. An old bushman showed it to me. I have crossed many times. And I can take you across. Only—" he hesitated—"horses, mules and the wagons cannot cross there. But what matter? The men can carry the stuff across. Look!"

With the toe of his boot he drew a crude map on the ground.

"It is ten miles due south from here to the crossing I speak of. Aar Pan is twenty miles due south from there. In other words, a matter of thirty miles from here to where your—er—allies wait for you. And there will be no one to oppose the crossing. On the other hand, Upington is over sixty miles from here. You would have a fight when you got there, lose many men, and then be faced with an eighty mile trek to Aar Pan. Now, I suggest that you cross at the falls. Your men shall carry everything across to the south bank—saddlery, everything. Then you could go into *laager* there and send a small detachment to Aar Pan asking them to supply you with mounts and transport wagons."

He paused expectantly.

"It sounds feasible," the commandant commented. "But what is your object in making things so much easier for us? I am puzzled."

"My desire to live, commandant," Sanders said bitterly. "You see, if I guided you to Upington someone at that *dorp* would be sure to recognize me. They wouldn't make life very comfortable for me in the years to come. But this other way . . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Um! Now, supposing we went to the falls and found that you had lied," the commandant mused aloud. "We would have gone a very little out of our way. We could easily return to our former plan . . . But you would not accompany us. Your services as a guide to Upington are not essential. No. So—if we found that you had lied about this crossing, you would die."

"I am not lying. There is a way across. I will take you across safely on condition, on condition that you——"

"You are not in a condition to make conditions," the commandant said bruskly. "And you shall guide us this shorter way."

Sanders sighed with relief.

"Good," he said. "Then please tell your men to rid me of these handcuffs and we will start at once. There is no time to waste—" he looked at the sky—"it is raining in the east."

"We will waste no time, then, Herr Sanders," the commandant agreed. "No. Not even to take off your handcuffs, will we wait. They shall stay on until you have proved to me that you have not lied about the ford."

IT WANTED a full hour to sunset. The German troopers, halted on the banks of the mighty river, were unloading the wagon and arranging its contents in packages that could be conveniently carried across the river.

They worked silently, seeming to be overawed by the vast desolation which encompassed them. Gigantic rocks strewed the ground, making it a chaos of confusion. Vegetation, there was none, save for a few grotesquely shaped *koker boomers* which added a touch of the macaber to the scene. A dull, murmuring sound vibrated through the air. It was an ominous note.

Sanders came into view, escorted by four soldiers. The commandant looked questioningly at the noncommissioned officer in charge of the party.

"Yes," that man reported briefly, "there is a crossing. We have been to the southern bank. It is not a task to be lightly undertaken. There were many perils . . . ."

Dismissing his men, the commandant turned to Sanders.

"It would seem that you did not lie. There is a way."

"Yes. There is a way. And it is best that we start at once."

"Why? Why not wait until morning?"

"Because the river may rise. I have known it to rise twenty feet in less than two hours. And we could not then cross. Indeed it has risen a few inches during the time we crossed just now to the other side and back."

The commandant nodded; then said:

"We are in your hands now, Herr Sanders. But let us at least wait until the handcuffs have been filed off."

Sanders shook his head.

"It would take too long. We will start now."

"Very well." The commandant shouted an order to the troopers who, their tasks finished, were lounging idly beside their packs. They sprang to their feet and Lieutenant von Essen marched them before their commandant, brought them to a halt and they waited, standing stiffly to attention, for orders.

"Give them your instructions, Herr Sanders," the commandant continued. "But remember, although I seem to place myself entirely in your hands, I shall be directly behind you during the crossing of the river. My revolver will be pressed against your spine. One false step . . . ."

He left the threat unfinished.

"One false step," Sanders said grimly, "and there will be no need to shoot me. I shall be hurtling over the falls . . . A nasty death!"

He stepped forward and spoke briefly to the men, impressing upon them the need for great caution.

"The passage of the river can be made in perfect safety," he concluded, "but only if you keep directly in the line I take. A step to the right, or to the left, out of line—and you will have no chance to rectify it."

TEN minutes later they moved off and, so impressed were the troopers of the dangers of the journey, that, even before they actually had climbed down the bank to the river bed they were treading carefully in Sanders' footsteps. At this point the river was a mile wide. A mile of sandy islets, boulder strewn, separated by fast flowing streams.

The crossing of the first stream was very slow. Sanders had said it was the most dangerous. The water came up to their waist and on either side of the narrow twisting ledge of rock—its existence alone made the crossing possible—was very deep. A misstep here, into deep water, meant to be carried swiftly away over one of the side falls.

Sanders shuffled his way slowly along the ledge, for, though it was only a little over two feet below the surface, the water was so muddy that it could not be seen. And the men cautiously followed his example.

But that peril safely negotiated, they moved swiftly over an island of sand and silt, still keeping to the single file formation. Over a series of smaller streams where the current was so swift that the men had hard work to keep to their feet and even Sanders, who was handicapped by his cork leg, was almost washed away. The commandant saved him by grabbing his coat collar.

They came at last to a wider stream, which they crossed by climbing over the enormous boulders which encumbered it.

It was here that Von Essen—who brought up the rear—and two troopers, immediately in front of him, were drowned. They thought they saw an easier, shorter way across the stream but the stability of the big boulder to which they entrusted themselves proved a delusion. It toppled over, precipitating them into the river and, instantly stilling their shrieks for help, the current sucked them under and they were not seen again.

"They disobeyed orders. Let the rest take warning," the commandant said sternly when the news was passed up the line to him.

Sanders made no comment. Not once since this difficult trek had begun had he looked back. His eyes were fixed, staring, as if he were laboring under great mental stress. Beads of sweat rolled down his cheeks.

He followed along a small stream now. It ran in a contrary direction to the others and led him to an open space strewn with boulders. Here the river disappeared from view, though the men could still hear it rushing swiftly beneath them.

On, Sanders led the men, through a chaos of river rock. Boulders the size of houses were heaped about in wild confusion. Some were balanced on top of each other so precariously that it looked as if a child could push them over.

The dull murmur of the falls had become a colossal thunder of sound, and a few minutes later, passing through a rift in the maze of rock, Sanders came to a halt on the edge of a Gargantuan abyss, over the opposite lip of which spouted a muddy volume of water, hurtling down into unbelievable depths. Here the river was converged from its mile width and, pent within a deep channel it had worn in the solid granite, was concentrated in that twenty yard wide spout.

And here the vastness of the place, the solitude, the utter desolation was intensified a thousandfold. Here nothing lived, nothing could live.

The troopers halted and dared not move. Drenched by clouds of spray, trembling to the vibration of the falls, deafened by the tremendous thunder, they gazed as though hypnotized. Several times, the commandant, shaken by the terrific spectacle, endeavored to speak and only succeeded when Sanders sat down, his legs hanging over the abyss and closed his eyes in a concentration of thought.

"Let us go on," the commandant shouted, yet barely made his voice heard. "Let us go on before some of my men throw themselves over. Before I, myself, jump over."

He frowned angrily when Sanders looked up and shook his head.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, and his finger contracted slightly on the trigger of his revolver.

Sanders grinned.

"Don't waste a bullet," he said. "This is almost as quick and just as sure." He leaned forward.

The commandant pulled him back, gasping:

"Fool!"

Sanders nodded.

"Yes. I'm afraid I am, after all, Commandant. Something seems to be forcing me in a direction my brain says I'm a fool to take." He spoke slowly, softly, as if to himself. Then, in a louder voice, he added: "But you will agree now, I think, that I am in a position to talk of conditions?"

"You mean?"

"I promised to take you safely across the river. I hinted at conditions. You would not listen to them. I was glad of that! You told me that I was not in a position to make conditions. Now I am—an' do?"

He paused and lolling back laughed softly.

"Go on," the commandant said in a furious tone.

"I've discovered that I, too, am a fool. As big a fool as those other two. But perhaps not—because I achieve something.

"Now let us consider your position." He looked at the western sky. It was shot with the crimson of a setting sun. "In half an hour, three-quarters of an hour at the most, it will be pitch dark. You are little more than halfway over the river. Without me to guide you, you cannot possible find your way in safety to one bank or the other. You will admit that?"

"For the sake of hearing what comes next, I will admit that. Well?"

"I forgot to add that the river is rising. Although I am well content to allow you plenty of time to consider your answer, the river will not. Even now, I judge, the first stream we crossed is impassable."

The commandant, and the men nearest to him, turned and looked upstream. They had all heard of the vagaries of this freak of rivers. Sanders smiled.

"So now I state my condition," he continued. "If you will agree to it, I will guide you in safety across the river to the south bank. Only you must make up your mind quickly. The condition is, that you and your men throw your arms and ammunition over the abyss here. Rifles, packs, everything must go. That is all. What do you say?"

Again the commandant's revolver menaced him.

"If you kill me now," Sanders said, halting the other's angry vituperations, "you will not only lose your equipment but your lives as well."

The commandant looked fixedly at him.

"I should have killed you before," he said slowly. "I should have listened to my intuition. Yet your expressed desire to live seemed such a desperate desire that I thought it must be true, that you would go to any lengths—so long as you were permitted to live."

"That was true," Sanders replied bitterly. "I think it is still almost true. And yet—Nobby Clark taught me this—there are worse things than death."

"Yes," he commandant agreed. "There are worse things than death. Life, having failed to accomplish an allotted task, is one of them. And so, I will sit down beside you and we will discuss life until the river rises."

He sat down beside Sanders.

"The river has already risen," that man said cryptically.

They were silent for a moment. Then the soldiers surged about them, crying:

"We consent to your condition. We will not stay here to be drowned like rats in a trap. The commandant is a fool. He is not in a position to speak for all of us."

As they spoke the soldiers threw their packs, rifles and sidearms over the chasm. Several leaped suddenly upon their commandant, wresting his revolver from him and sending it hurtling down to join the others. They were obliged to hold him then, fearing that he would throw himself over. They reasoned with him, insisting on their right to live and on the folly of a needless sacrifice of lives.

Sanders rose to his feet.

"It would seem, Commandant," he said softly, "that the game has been played for you. And your honor is safe."

The commandant nodded, tried to speak but words failed him. He seemed to have aged suddenly. Sanders turned to the impatient, fear ridden soldiers.

"Follow me closely," he said. "I shall travel fast. There is little time to waste."

He did not speak to them again but led them swiftly across boulder strewn wastes and swift flowing streams. His leg pained him and he was utterly exhausted. The crisis past, he felt strangely weak. His thoughts were self-condemning and bitter. He was tormented by regrets . . . .

The southern bank loomed up very near—a black, forbidding pile of rocks, gleaming in the crimson of sunset's afterglow. Beyond was a desolate waste. To the soldiers it meant life. They forgot the perils of trekking through the desert, unpiloted, foodless, weaponless in their enemy's territory.

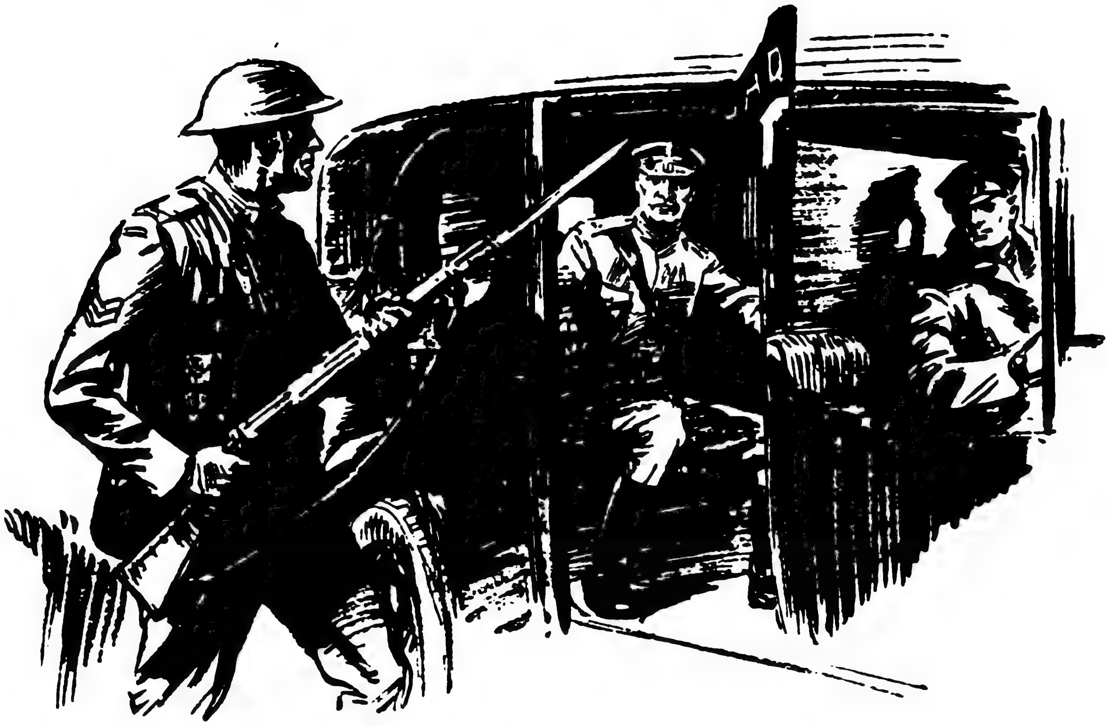
Sanders wondered vaguely what his fate would be at their hands. Their revenge, he thought, would be very swift . . . He did not much care. He had sold his life at a high price. His was no purposeless sacrifice . . . .

Then bitterness engulfed him again. All his plans, his dreams, had been brought to ruin. He had thrown away everything for which he had worked those seven long years . . . .

They were crossing the last stream now, a strangely placid stream, after the rushing, restless turmoil of the others.

Suddenly the bitterness sloughed from him. His head jerked erect; his shoulders squared. A warm feeling of elation ousted all regrets and he moved more swiftly to whatever awaited him.

Life or death . . . He could face either! He had played a man's game—and won. The rest did not matter.



ORDERS

A Tale of the Grim Discipline of War

By ARED WHITE

IT WAS a big sized order. I knew that the minute I heard the captain of B Company bawl it out to Corporal Walters on the run. And another thing I knew was: When any skipper gives any order to any soldier like Corporal Walters, he wants to be right sure he means every word of it. For that order is going to be carried out—right on down to the last letter.

"Corporal Walters," shouted the captain as he went bustling past us, getting things set for battle, "this road is closed ahead of this point. Climb onto it and don't let any wheel traffic pass here unless you get my order in person or writing. Got it?"

"Yes'r," the corporal answered, raising his hand to the barrel of his grounded rifle in formal salute.

That was all. But that was enough for me to know that road was closed tight as a cement wall. So tight, not even a pair of silver stars could bluff a hole through it big enough to pass a D. H. Q. limousine; that is, not unless the general's aide went out first and got the skipper of B Company to call off his watchdog. And from the way that busy skipper went chasing on into the woods over on our left flank, getting all the pegs laid for the jump-off next day, I knew he wasn't going to be an easy man to find quick, in a pinch.

No sooner is a main artery closed to wheel traffic than everybody on wheels in the Army wants to use it the worst kind. No wonder they wanted to use this particular road. There was good cover, due ahead into enemy terrain, for another three hundred meters before it came under boche fire. Three hundred meters is a long way to hike for busy folks sweating around day and night under a full head of steam, getting ready for a big smash. And everybody from artillery to medicos wants a peek ahead of the jump-off line at the front, so they can figure just where they'll set up next day after the infantry has shoved the whole division map ahead a few kilometers.

First up, almost before the skipper had vanished, rolled an artillery rubberneck car with a major in charge. When the corporal challenged, the major got out to debate the matter, explaining that the only hope of winning the war was for his car to be passed up the road. When that didn't impress the corporal, artillery pulled his rank and strong-arm language. Corporal Walters just stood there listening in his polite, respectful way until the major was through talking. Then he shook his head.

"My orders are, sir," says the corporal, "nobody on wheels passes ahead of this point except on the captain's orders."

Next, up came an ambulance. Said they were on the way out to get a man who'd been shot up on patrol. It'd save the litter bearers a long hike and maybe the wounded man's life. That certainly did sound reasonable enough. So did the woes of a motorcycle courier with a rush message for the artillery major who'd gone on ahead, cussing mad, afoot. But there wasn't any use talking about it. That road was closed and there wasn't anybody getting through.

Not even a full colonel from the artillery, who came chugging up in his little sedan and turned purple with rage when the corporal halted him. The higher they rank, the harder they argue. You see there's sentries that can be talked out of anything. Big, bullnecked fellows who make a lot of bluster and fuss just to cover up a weak spot inside. Or timid lads, more afraid of a pair of metal shoulder ornaments than they are of a boche machine gun nest. Mostly that two kinds wilt when a cold eyed major or colonel claws at them long enough.

But there wasn't anything doing with Walters. It's his kind won the war. And if there's any blame when he carries out hard orders without flinching, then they ought to blame the man who gives the orders.

"My orders are, sir," he told the colonel, "nobody on wheels passes ahead on this road."

A man with the rank and experience of that colonel sure wasted a lot of time with the corporal. He should have seen right away he was up against a stone wall. Walters was one of those gentle, soft spoken sort. The kind that never bristles or walks so very straight; or ever struts and swaggers his shoulders. The kind with a mild face that has high cheek bones and a broad, well shaped nose, with a straight line of a mouth over a decent shaped chin; and grayish blue eyes that look at you straight and easy without staring or boring. There couldn't be any mistake about that kind. A man that glares and looks ferocious may be like the kind that blusters and roars—just covering up something soft with a noisy bluff. But when you get a man of the Corporal Walters' set, there's no pulling him off—unless you get a litter bearer or undertaker to finish the job.

Ration carts, ammunition, motorcycles, more reconnoissance cars . . . Everything on wheels in the division rolled up in the next half hour. It did look to me like a hard piece of nonsense to close that road. Not that anybody could blame the captain of B Company for closing it. I knew well enough where the order came from. Not for two months did I cool heels clerking at G. H. Q. without learning the stuff orders like that are made of. There's a whole flock of high ranking staff officers who haven't got anything else to do. All they do is write young novels telling how to run the next battle; and they don't have to tell anybody why. If they want to close a road, a red dot on the map does it. All they need do is scrawl in a footnote telling which roads and when. Then some more staff officers pass the word along by phone to the brigades, regiments and battalions and, by messenger, to the companies. After a while some company skipper bawls it to a corporal—and there you are.

Knowing that, I couldn't help but think maybe somebody must have just spilled a red spot on the map by mistake. Why close up such a perfectly good road that everybody wanted to use? But then I was getting my joy out of it lying there on the right flank of the company jump-off line watching the corporal do his stuff. My prayer was that some general'd come along and try his luck at getting through. But I wasn't hardly expecting what did roll up next.

IT WAS a G. H. Q. limousine. And I almost jumped to attention myself at sight of the red white and blue shield that proclaimed to the world the presence of some mighty nabob from General Headquarters itself. Then I remembered that in the presence of the enemy you forget military knee bending stuff, and I sat tight to watch the circus; for I knew that G. H. Q. car wasn't going to turn back without a struggle.

Corporal Walters stopped it easy enough. He stood there in the middle of the road with his Enfield at port until the G. H. Q. fenders almost struck him as the car stopped with a grinding of brakes. There were two in the car: the soldier driving and a middle aged major sitting on the seat alongside the chauffeur. The major let down a side window and leaned out.

"General Headquarters!" he snapped. "On reconnoissance. Step aside promptly."

"My orders are, sir," says Corporal Walters without raising his voice much, "no vehicle passes ahead on this road."

One thing I give the major credit for: he sized up his man as no weakling to be bluffed aside in a hurry. And when he got out of the car and stood in front of the corporal I saw there was something in the air to try the corporal's mettle for sure.

There are officers and officers, weak and strong. But this one was all man and all business. The gentleman type, I'd say, with fine features that could turn as hard as steel, and gray eyes that could look right through you without glaring. It takes an iron man to stand up in front of that kind and say no when he's got his neck bowed.

"Corporal, this is a serious matter to delay my car at this point," said the major; and I could feel the cold, clear cut of his words even if he didn't lift his voice. "I order you to step aside promptly."

Corporal Walters looked back without flinching; although I could see he was more nervous than he was when the artillery colonel was lambasting him for holding out and not using some discretion of his own in an emergency, as the colonel had put it.

"I am only carrying out my orders, sir," the corporal said.

"Just what were your orders?" demanded the major. "And from whom?"

"From my captain, sir. They were that this road is closed at this point to wheel traffic and I was not to let anybody pass ahead of this point by car without the cap'n's order in person or writing, sir."

"I countermand those orders," the major snapped. "You will pass my car without delay. Do you understand my order?"

I see Corporal Walters shift from one foot to the other and blink his eyes several times like he was thinking hard.

"Yes'r, I understand what you say," the corporal answers. But there wasn't anything in his voice that sounded like a passport.

"Are you going to obey orders or are you not?" the major cut at him. "I shall temporize with you no longer."

"Yes'r, I'll obey orders," said Corporal Walters in a tone that showed he had made up his mind.

"Good," the major exclaimed. "Under the circumstances I'll make no report of your insubordinate conduct towards me."

Well, it looks to me I'd lost my guess. I wasn't looking for Corporal Walters to weaken none; not even for G. H. Q. or the President of the United States himself. The major switched around and climbed back in his car. The driver roared his motors and ground in his clutch. But when the car moved, Corporal Walters didn't.

Instead of jumping out of the way as the limousine begun to pick up, the corporal dropped his rifle to the charge bayonet. And it wasn't hard to tell from the set of his face that he meant business. The car stopped again and the major leaned out with a curse.

"What insolence is this!" he rasped at Walters. "Did you not just tell me you would obey orders?"

"Yes'r," said Walters. "My cap'n's orders, sir. No vehicle passes ahead of this point."

With another oath the major turned to his driver and ordered him to drive on.

"Out of the way or I'll run you down, you insubordinate pig!" bellowed the major as the car leaped down the road.

Corporal Walters didn't jump aside a second too soon. That major wasn't fooling. He was going up that road even if he had to run over a noncommissioned officer. And I saw Corporal Walters wasn't fooling either when he began calling out his challenges.

"Halt!" he yelled after the car, at the same second throwing the bolt of his rifle and raising its muzzle. "Halt!" he shouted a second time. And then the third challenge. The car was gaining speed. The major didn't even look back.

I saw Corporal Walters was aiming at the rear tire when he fired the first shot. The tire blew out with a bang, but the car kept right on ahead. I saw the corporal's muzzle lift and a second shot smashed through the glass in the rear of the car. It looked to me like he hit the driver. But the car kept on. And then he fired three times more, one shot right after the other, as fast as he could swing his bolt.

Of a sudden, the car careened crazylike across the road and smashed into a thicket of little trees. The corporal stood there in the road a while looking at the wreck in a dazed sort of way. Then he turned back again as if he had just remembered the road still had to be watched, while a whole platoon of us went running up to where the car had piled up.

WELL, I reckon orders are orders. And I know war's not any high school picnic. When I got to the wreck of the car, there lay the major, dead as a stone on top of his dead driver. It seemed a hard thing if he thought he was only going out there to do his duty, getting the lay of the land. Somebody'd sure pulled a bad one now, even if it was war and a battle in the offing.

The captain came running up and turned white as an old issue squad tent when he saw what'd happened and found out what'd caused it to happen. I reckon he hadn't ever figured on anything just like that. But if I'd had a speaking part I'd told him right there he ought to be sure of his words to begin with, when he gave positive orders to a soldier like Corporal Walters in the face of the enemy.

"There'll be merry hell to pay now!" roared the captain when he got back to the corporal. "Didn't you see that was a G. H. Q. staff car? Why didn't you use your head?"

"My orders from the Cap'n, sir," Corporal Walters reminded the skipper, "was nobody on wheels went past without the Cap'n said so."

The captain went back on the run to tell our battalion major. Our major phoned our colonel who let the brigade general know. It caused a lot more fluster among the high rankers than if a boche shock division had showed up of a sudden to attack. The fact is, it always looked to me like our rankers were more afraid of the wrath of G. H. Q. than they were of the Kaiser's Army, anyhow. And shooting down a G. H. Q. staff officer in cold blood wasn't calculated to put High Headquarters in a happy frame of mind.

The chief of staff of the division came down himself to get the hang of things. Now the skipper of B Company had been excited enough that he forgot to relieve Corporal Walters; and the chief of staff didn't have any more luck driving past the corporal than had any of the others. If the captain hadn't been along himself to modify his orders for the colonel's benefit, the chief of staff would have been put to it to walk out there himself to inspect the dead major.

When he came back past the jump-off line, chief of staff was grim as marble. You could read it in his face as far as you could see him that he was a badly worried man. And wasn't it enough to make our whole Headquarters bunch jumpy? If it'd been nothing more than one of our own majors, there mightn't have been much to fret about. Majors are expendible the same as second lieutenants. You can always requisition a new supply from the nearest replacement depot. So the loss of one or two could be put down to error, over-zealousness or what you wish. That's war. The only trouble was, this one didn't belong to our division—but to G. H. Q.

The colonel took Walters back to headquarters and rode me along as a witness. That didn't look so good. Another black symptom was, the colonel didn't say a word. Just sat there and stared straight ahead. It looked stormier still for the corporal when we were taken right into the general's P. C. and found the general sitting there with a face as somber and fretted as the colonel's.

"Is this the man who shot down the major?" asked the general, looking straight at Corporal Walters in a way generals have when there's something serious afoot.

"That is he," said the colonel. "The facts are, sir, as first reported. The major drove past and the corporal shot to kill, after first challenging and blowing out a rear tire with his first shot."

"What explanation have you to offer of your failure to use some common sense in this matter?" the general demanded of Corporal Walters. He didn't raise his voice, but I thought from the sound of it that it would sound better for the corporal if the general had been hopping mad and shouting at him.

"Sir, my orders from the cap'n was, let nobody pass by vehicle under any circumstances," said the corporal. "I carried out my orders, sir."

The corporal didn't loose his nerve. He was rigid and under a terrible strain standing there in front of those awesome stars, but it sounded to me like his voice was just as firm as the general's. The general sat there looking at the corporal a long time. The corporal stood there looking straight back for just as long. I guess it didn't take the general long to figure out the stuff his man was made of. He turned to his colonel.

"Did you get the major's travel orders off his body?" he asked.

There was a flicker in the colonel's voice as he said he did, and I saw his hand tremble as he passed the flimsy across the table to the general.

"Just what I feared," the general almost groaned. I could see blue veins rising in his neck and forehead as he read that order. It was one of those orders that give a G. H. Q. officer carte blanche to go anywhere necessary to carry out the instructions of the commander-in-chief.

"It's young Doorn, I see," the general reflected after a while. "He served on my staff on the Border two years ago. I was very fond of him."

His voice softened when he said that, but not for very long. Everybody loses so many friends in the field there isn't much time to feel bad over it when the news comes. He was back on the business end of the tragedy in a jiffy.

"Corporal," he accused Walters, "you have killed an exceedingly fine officer."

"I'm sorry, sir," said the corporal. "I'm sorry it was necessary."

Then the general made up his mind what he was going to do about it. He gave the instructions to the colonel and motioned Corporal Walters and me out of his P. C.

"Colonel," he directed, "notify G. H. Q. what has happened. Hold these men here. It's up to higher authority to decide what they want to do about it."

If ever I wanted a speaking part in this man's army it was then and there. I wanted to remind the general of a few things. I wanted to quote some of his own words to him. Wasn't it him preached that obedience to orders is the soldier's one true religion? His one hope of usefulness on this earth and of salvation in the next? Our one chance of winning the war?

A corporal using his own judgment to override his captain's orders in the face of the enemy! Where would it lead to—even if it did save some major who didn't want to walk a few hundred yards? I wanted to remind the general of the time he megaphoned us about why the Germans didn't get into Paris on their first junket down the Marne. Why was it? Just because a big heinie general decided he was smarter than the man who wrote the battle orders—and changed them to suit himself.

IT WAS getting along towards dusk when another big G. H. Q. limousine rolled up to the division P. C. Corporal Walters and I were cooling heels outside. They hadn't kept any guard over the corporal; but I figured that was because they decided he wasn't the kind to run away. And besides there was no place to run, what with the boche Army due ahead and the military police hanging out on every crossroad clear back as far as G. H. Q.

There was a tall, gaunt colonel got out of the car and went inside the P. C. He was in there a long while before he came out with the chief of staff and went over to look at the major's dead body which had been brought back by now. Then he went back into the P. C. again and very soon an orderly came for the corporal. I took it upon myself to follow along, being the chief witness and wanting to be handy to tell what I'd seen, and thought, if they gave me a chance.

One hopeful sign had flashed into my mind. It was the make-up of the tall colonel from G. H. Q. He looked like a real soldier who'd spent a lot of time with troops. A face like his, I estimated, couldn't have picked up all that burn in the A. E. F. It took the sun of the Philippines, and the sand and the wind of the Border, to do such a fine job of coloring; and he had the litheness and gait of the mounted service—another mighty good humane sign.

But my heart went into my mouth as e came up to the door. I could hear e mumble of voices there. And suddenly loud voice sang out as clear as a bugle: "Your division will have an opportunity morrow to avenge the brutal murder of ajor Doorn!" it said. "I know he has iends enough among you old-timers to sure a good, clean job."

I saw Corporal Walters stiffen. He hung ere at the door a minute like a man who s received a bayonet thrust. Then he lled himself together, and inside we went face the music.

The room was full of staff officers, all f them as somber and grim as so many wls. Their eyes centered on the corporal s he took his place before them, jaw set, igid at attention, facing the gaff like a an. The G. H. Q. colonel stepped forard and began questioning him in a casual ort of way that might be the beginning f anything.

"You are the corporal who stopped the ar?"

"Yes'r."

"Before you shot, did the man explain o you that he had orders authorizing him o go where he pleased?"

"Yes'r."

"Then why did you kill him when he orced his way by?"

"My orders, sir, come from my cap'n. hey were—I was to let no vehicle pass nder any circumstances unless the cap'n aid so."

"Didn't you think you might use some iscretion of your own in such a situation s this, Corporal?"

"No, sir. That is not the way I been trained as a soldier, sir. Not in the face of the enemy, during war."

"Corporal, you seem to show no great amount of remorse for what you did today."

The corporal swallowed hard and his eyes went to the floor.

"I'm sorry—sorry I had to do it, sir. But there wasn't anything else I could do."

"Am I to understand from that statement you'd do the same thing over again?"

"Yes'r," Corporal Walters head was back up and he was looking straight at the G. H. Q. colonel. "Unless my orders allowed me to use my own judgment about it."

"Corporal," the colonel announced, stepping close in front of him, "you're a credit to your training as a soldier in this division. I'm not going to commend you for obeying orders. That's what a soldier is expected to do—to the letter and without question. But some proper notice will be taken of the exceedingly valuable service you performed today. The man you shot was Lieutenant Baron von Kessler, an exceedingly able boche operative who has been bluffing weak sentries and busting our lines for months. Early this morning he murdered Major Doorn in his quarters at G. H. Q. and got away in the major's uniform and car with the major's papers and maps. I might add that if you had passed him with his map of our dispositions, the boche artillery would have profited this very night to the tune of several hundred American lives—possibly yours among them."

There will begin in the next issue a remarkable and intensely thrilling three-part novel of the Great War, "Secret Operative K-13," by Joel Rogers. It is the story of a spy whose uncanny genius wiped out an army corps, and of a lone American flyer who met him on the strangest rendezvous ever recorded in all military annals.

The LIGHTS *of* TORAL

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

CHAPTER I

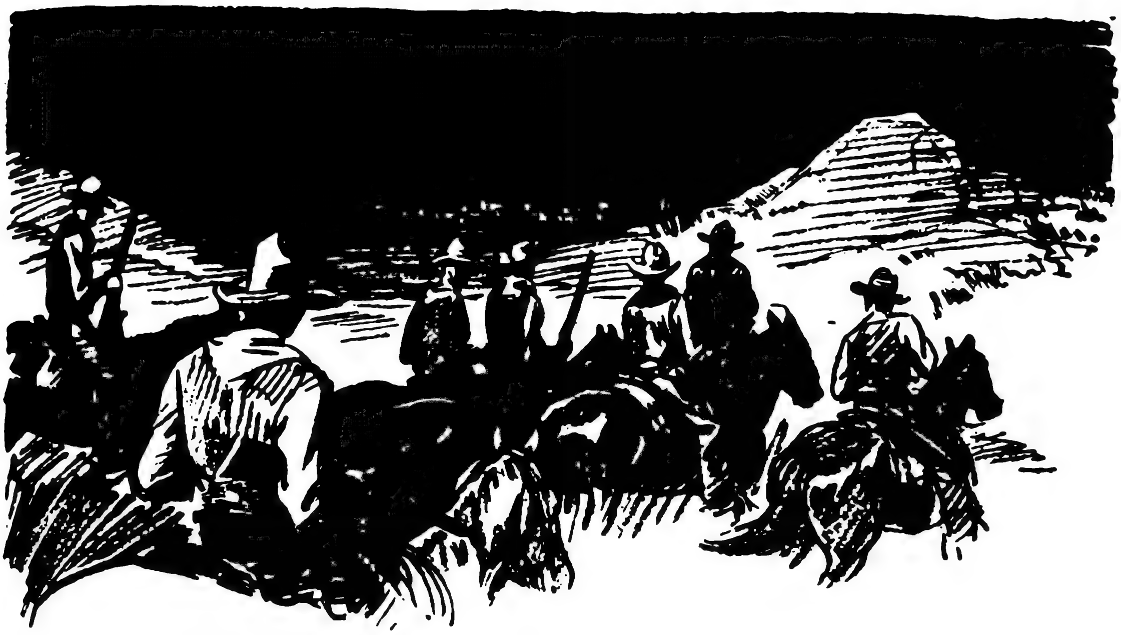
BURTON BELL TAKES THE ACID TEST

CAPTAIN QUILL CLOUD, of Company M, Texas Rangers, sat in front of his tent hugging the little shade it offered, just after noon. His short, stubby gray mustache writhed and wiggled like a caterpillar with cramps as he cursed in a steady, fluent stream under his breath. Captain Quill wasn't named for a feather. His parents named him Aquila, which means an eagle. Eventually they threw away the two "A's" and called him Quill; but he was still an eagle, and sometimes he swooped. In fact, the cause of his profanity was an order which he was reading, in which the adjutant general commanded him to swoop, and swoop immediately.

Captain Quill had already been ordered to clean up Toral, and was going about it in his own way. He had been in the service a good many years and had helped sweep the undesirables west,. across the Pecos River. There, in the forks of that stream and the Rio Grande, lay a block of country about the size of the State of Maine. It was the country Thomas Jefferson may have had in mind when he said: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." Anyway, it was a place in which one should watch his step, and keep his gun handy. From the character of the people he had driven across the Pecos, Captain Quill felt sure that good people were very scarce in that wild land west of the Pecos, where it was said, "God and the Law never had gone."

A tall, handsome, boyish young fellow approached the captain and stood at attention.

"Morning, Bell," growled the captain. "Sit down. I reckon you been cussin' me like all the rest for makin' headquarters in this God forsaken place. There's reason enough for it. Only complaint is no shade. We won't need shade long. I located here on this new railroad so we'd have a shipping base to get our catch out, and could ship in grain for our saddle stock. I thought there was a town here; but a telegraph office in a box car, two windmills, and a water tank, and half a dozen shacks don't make what I call a town. Best we can do, though. Get too close to a thing, you can't see it good.



Out of the Annals of the Toughest Fighting Force in the World, the Old Texas Rangers, Comes This Novelette of a Town That Was Sentenced to Die

Map I got says Toral's forty mile west of here, on the Rio Grande. Instructions I got says Toral needs cleaning, bad and pronto. You know this country, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. I want you to scout it for a few days—or rather, a few nights. I don't reckon a Ranger, as such, would be very welcome in Toral. You are released from all other duty. Go into that drying kiln of hell and see what you can find out. I'll expect you back in three days. Start as soon as you can get ready."

The captain was still reading orders from the department and steadily cursing, half an hour later.

"How many damn places does he think sixteen men can be at one time? There's more towns west of the Pecos than they is fiddlers in hell! I thought they weren't nobody out here but a few cowboys and a desperado or two, but they seems to be more good people that needs protection than they are in all the rest of Texas. I got a hunch that Toral is the main boil and the rest are just pimples from it, and I'm playin' that hunch. Maybe I—Judas criminy! Look at that kid ride!" Captain Quill sprang to his feet, dropping his papers on the ground.

It was a show worth seeing. Burt Bell had climbed aboard his old blue nosed Spanish bronc and was warming him up. There wasn't a trick that Old Blue didn't know, and yet the young Ranger was riding him all over. Presently the horse's head came up with a snap. Bell's forked tailed quirt seared down one blue roan ham and his spurs bit into the ribs. Old Blue knew when the show was over, as well as anybody, and he literally made a blue streak toward the west.

"Something damn strange and unusual about that boy," mused Captain Quill Cloud, as he picked up his papers and sat down. "It's a cinch he's wolf wild, but he's sired right to go, if I ain't mistaken. Sometimes, when he gets them silent fits on him, I'm afraid of him myself. And I get plumb suspicious of what he's doing out in this wild and uncurried neck of hell, west of the Pecos. Still, you got to fight the devil with fire. It's a toss-up whether he's going to make a good Ranger or is just a spy. I know he's a thoroughbred, all right, but a spoilt thoroughbred is the most worthless horse on earth. Oh, well.

I'm giving him the acid test now. I've had him in the company a month, and he has gone straight. If he puts this job through, I'll know I can tie to him." At the end of which soliloquy, the captain went on reading the bundle of mail that had beat him into this lovely town of Dunston.

Burton Bell was a puzzle to Captain Quill Cloud. He had appeared at company headquarters a month before that, while M Company was still at Fort Stockton. Ranger captains hired and fired their men the same as a ranch boss would. There was a vacancy in the company at the time because one of the men had been shot in a raid. The companies had been cut to a captain, sergeant and sixteen men by an economical legislature, and Captain Cloud had cursed himself sick when it happened. Men who wanted to go a-rangering west of the Pecos were not very plentiful, so the captain had signed the young man on. He looked like a boy, but said he was twenty-two, and had been punching cattle west of the Pecos for three years. The captain had said to himself at the time:

"If he's punched cattle in this neck of hell for three years, he can take care of himself. I'll take him on and watch him."

Watching had developed the fact that Burton Bell was the best rider the captain had ever seen, and one of the swiftest and surest shots with both pistol and rifle; that he wasn't afraid to go anywhere, any time. Captain Quill was sure that one of two things were true: Burton Bell had committed some crime back in the States and was hiding west of the Pecos. Or else he was after someone, had located him, and now had joined the Rangers, to get his man and be inside the law. Time would tell which.

Meantime, Old Blue had settled into a swinging fox trot that was carrying Burt Bell swiftly toward the setting sun and the wicked city of Toral. The sun dropped into the plains as if someone had dropped a golden coin into nature's slot machine. Burt had been riding five hours and had covered thirty miles. Just after sunset he reached a country where a great notch was broken in the edge of the rim rock, and he looked down through it, as through a gunsight, into the purple shadows of a long gorge that led down to the Rio Grande. Burt spurred through the gap as quickly as possible. He had no objection to being seen in Toral and the country round about; but he didn't want to be seen coming from the direction of Ranger headquarters. The Toralese didn't know yet that he was a Ranger; and what they didn't know was quite likely to hurt them, in spite of the old saying to the contrary.

Just below the rim rock there was a broad shelf on which there was stunted brush and some grass. Burt turned off the trail, and into this thicket. He dismounted, loosened his cinch and took the bit out of Old Blue's mouth so he could graze a bit if he wanted to. From there on, there were two miles of steep, rocky downgrade. It was harder going than upgrade, and he wanted his horse to rest a bit before tackling it. Burt ate a lunch which he took from a saddle pocket and drank some water from his canteen. Then rolling a smoke, he stretched out on the ground with his shoulders against a smooth boulder. Darkness had come, and far in the distance lights were twinkling like fireflies used to twinkle evenings back in the Brazos Bottoms.

"The lights of Toral," mused Burt. "'Toral' means main, or principal. She's the principal city of her kind, all right. There's not another on earth like Toral since—the Bible calls the turn on a lot of things. What was it old Ezekiel said about Tyre? 'The merchants among the people shall hiss at thee; thou shalt be a terror, and never shalt be any more.' That's about what is going to happen to Toral. It took Old Nebuchadrezzar thirteen years to clean up Tyre. He had a lot longer name than Captain Quill, but I'll bet Quill busts Neb's record to hell and back on the clean-up order."

Burt's musing indicated that, while he spoke the vernacular of the cow camp, with his original, soft Brazos Bottoms drawl, he had received some education in his boyhood, and had read considerably and with understanding. After a rest, he mounted and rode on down the deep draw, watching the twinkling lights of Toral.

"Them's kerosene lights, that smoke some," he mused on. "They's some more lights in Toral that can't be seen at this distance. They smoke, too, and chew and cuss and drink and gamble and raise hell generally. They're the leading lights. I wouldn't wonder them's the lights that Captain Quill would be most interested in."

IT WAS drawing on toward midnight. A mile from town, in the flat valley, a plain trail came into the one Burt was following. He knew that trail, as he knew every trail in the Trans-Pecos country. It led down the river from three big ranches, on each of which he had worked one year. It was known as the Rock Creek trail, because it followed that stream down from the highlands into the Rio Grande Valley. Just before reaching the point where the Rock Creek trail came in, Old Blue stopped and snorted. Burt looked down and saw a dark object almost under his horse's forefeet. Two of them, in fact. He dismounted and discovered, first a man, then a woman, lying right in the trail. Both were still warm, but quite dead.

"Knife work, I reckon," he mused. "I ain't heard no shots, and they ain't been dead long. Man's an American. Woman's Mex. Tried to leave town 'thout a passport, maybe. Wonder can I get in without the countersign. Guess I'll try it. Can't do anything for these folks, and this ain't a nice place to be. Reckon I came down the Rock Creek trail, if anybody asks me."

Burt was going to be asked all right. Halfway from the fork in the trail to Toral, two men on horseback barred the way.

"Who are you and where'd you come from?" asked one of the men in surly tones.

"Me? Why, I'm just a pore, lone, wanderin' cowboy from the Bar X ranch. I ambles down the Rock Creek trail, seeking the city, some refreshments, and maybe a little fun."

"Meet anybody?"

"Shore didn't."

"All right. Go ahead. You can get in, anyway. No rule ag'in that. Don't know whether you can get out or not."

"Thank you, gents. Gettin' in is my mainest desire right now. I'm hungry and dry." And pricking Old Blue with his spurs, Burt trotted on toward town. As he went along, he said to himself, "Them two gents is killers. They not only kill men, but they kill women. As a decent Ranger I reckon I should have wasted a coupla cartridges on 'em, but it might ruin my future usefulness."

A few minutes later, Old Blue's hoofs thudded on the sandy main street of Toral. Late as it was, there was no indication that the populace meant to sleep any that night. From half a dozen dance halls came the jangle of squeaking fiddles and pianos out of tune. Lights flared from barroom doors and raucous laughter filled the night. A few horses stood along the street, reins on the ground, cowboy fashion.

In front of Sam Wing's Chop House and Restaurant, Burt dismounted, added Blue to the row of horses and entered the restaurant. At a table well back in a corner he sat down, ordered a T-bone steak and potatoes, coffee, and pie. While he was waiting for it, he looked the place over. He had eaten there many times, but tonight there seemed to be an undercurrent of excitement pervading the atmosphere. Burt knew the leading lights of Toral, to whom he had referred. Sam Wing's place was the leading restaurant, and the great men all frequented it. Just now, Frank Fenley, leading merchant and banker, was eating at another table. Night was day in Toral. As Burt sat looking at Fenley and wondering if it was true, as reported, that this man was a multi-millionaire, Jim Hogan, proprietor of the biggest gambling house in town, entered, walked to Fenley's table and spoke a few low words. Fenley, who had just got his food seasoned to taste, laid down his fork and knife, rose, picked up his hat, and the two left the place.

"Somebody must be bad sick," mused Burt. "That old he tiger wouldn't quit his grub just for fun."

Burt's order came, and he ate leisurely. He knew the night life of Toral didn't get into full swing until after midnight. He had said there was no other town like Toral, and he was right. At least, not in America. There was nothing permanent about it. It was one of those towns that sprang up along the border, a city today, forgotten tomorrow. It hadn't been forgotten yet, but it would be, in its turn. The buildings were flimsy affairs, but the furniture and fixtures in the saloons and dance halls were of the finest. There were gold and diamonds and rich silks in Toral, but the back door was always open for escape. That "back door" was a ford on the Rio Grande, at the very end of the main street. A horse and rider could cross all right, at low water. But two serviceable pole and paddle ferry boats were needed in time of high water. Toral boldly and openly brought its liquors, cigars—in fact all goods obtainable in Mexico—across the river without thought of customs. There had never been a customs guard there. It was simply a Spanish town on the Texas side of the river. It was there because the Federal Government had taken no notice of it, and the Texas Rangers had not yet set about cleaning up the Trans-Pecos country.

Burt Bell knew all these things and could have told the captain of them, but he had reasons for not doing it. One of them was that conditions changed rapidly in Toral, and he hadn't been there for three months. He didn't want to make any statement to Captain Quill that he couldn't verify. It took a real man to look Captain Quill Cloud in the eye when he was in a good humor. The devil himself couldn't do it when Quill Cloud was mad or felt that he had been deceived. Bell had been looking his captain in the eye, and he meant to keep on doing it.

There was one man in Toral that Burt Bell meant to kill. Just one out of all of the scores that needed killing. He would have killed him long ago, but he was too powerful. That man was no less than the banker, merchant prince, and chief smuggler, Frank Fenley. Burt was a stripling of a boy when Frank Fenley was tried for killing Burt's father. By use of money and crooked lawyers, Fenley came clear on a plea of self-defense. Burt's mother was already dead. Fenley disappeared from town immediately after the trial, and the Bell boy disappeared soon afterwards. There was a little talk, and then the matter was forgotten.

Burt had followed the man west. It was a year before he located Fenley at Toral. Fenley was already rich. Burt had watched him grow richer in his godless traffic in drugs and every other evil thing. He had seen Fenley a hundred times; had been in inches of him more than once; could have killed him a number of times. But he felt it would be murder. If he gave Fenley a chance and then shot him he couldn't have gotten away; for Frank Fenley was the very life and spirit of Toral. Without him, there would be no Toral, and there was always a guard about him. In the clean-up of Toral, Burt meant to have his chance at Fenley. That was why he was in the Rangers, and he tingled at the thought.

Through all the three years he had been west of the Pecos, Burt had gone by the name of Skinny Jones. He had never given his real name, except to Captain Quill Cloud and his sergeant. Even then, every man in the company called him the Kid. So the rich and powerful Frank Fenley, who had seen Burt many a time, had no idea that he was the son of the man he had murdered because that man knew too much about him.

BURT finished his supper, paid his check, and strolled into the Golden Wheel. This was a saloon and gambling house downstairs, and the finest dance hall in Toral upstairs. Burt had drank in every saloon, gambled in every gambling room, and danced in every dance hall in Toral. He had made a business of it. He drank little, and therefore won more at the games than most. He was a free spender in the dance halls, yet he kept himself fairly clean from the vices of Toral.

The girls in the dance hall were a drifting lot, for the most part. But there were a few who stayed on. One of them was Happy Nell, a tall, slender blonde, in the Golden Wheel. She was a bit of a singer and actress, and her husband was a pianist—until a gambler killed him, thinking he would get Nell. Two mornings after, the gambler was found in an alley with a knife still sticking in his heart. Nobody cared much, and Nell proved an alibi. But after that she wasn't popular. She still sang and played bits on the stage. She danced with strangers who were not particular. She was still pretty, but there was a fixed, cold hardness about her face that made her mechanical smile look ghastly.

Burt knew Nell. He had bought beer for her and talked to her many a time. This woman, hard as she was, had done more than any one thing to keep Burt straight. She was bright, intelligent and well educated. Often she had waved her pale hand at the gibbering mob, and said to him:

"There's nothing to all that, Skinny. You're a nice kid. Keep away from it. Marry a nice clean girl and raise a family. That's the only life."

Burt Bell, Texas Ranger, in the midst of as much evil and lawlessness as any Ranger ever saw, loafed leisurely about the gambling room, then climbed the broad carpeted stair to the dance hall. Happy Nell, so nicknamed because she was always sour looking, was standing at the head of the stair.

"Hello, Skinny!" she said. "Buy me a bottle of beer. I ain't made the house a penny tonight and I'm afraid they'll can me."

She led the way to a table back against the wall and they sat down. Two bottles, the corks out, and the glasses turned down over them, were brought and set on the table.

"I don't want any beer," said Nell, "but let's pour it out, and you listen to me. Would you gamble twenty dollars to help me do a little good for once in my life?"

"Dunno. Might."

"I know you're thinking about that sister in the Bible that tied the red string in her window. All right. She could have been worse. There's something I can do tonight that's in line with what she did, if you'll help me. They've got a new rule here that when a girl has soaked twenty suckers for twenty bottles of beer, she can call it a day. These two bottles stick you for two dollars. Gimme the whole twenty. I'll turn it in, and knock off."

"Then what?"

"You get up and go right out of here. Put your horse in the livery stable, and go to the old dobe house that stands in the chaparral at the east end of the street, on the north side."

"Good big order," said Burt. "Why put my horse up?"

"Because you can't get a horse out of Toral tonight, and maybe never. You ain't a spy, that I know. And, anyway, it ain't you I want to help. It's somebody else. Will you do it?"

"This is a square deal, is it?"

"Yes. It's so square that I'm likely to lose my life over it. But I'd cheerfully lose it if I can put this over."

"You've made a deal," said Burt, pushing back his chair. He rose, walked out of the dance hall, down the broad stair, and onto the street. Here he mounted Old Blue, but he didn't go to the livery stable. He had an idea he might want his horse again before daylight. Instead, he rode out to the abandoned old dobe house. It fronted on the main street and had no fence around it. The house, of several rooms, stood in a dense thicket of mesquite and chaparral which extended back of it several hundred feet. Burt took his horse into the thicket back of the house and tied him securely. Then he crept back to the street and hid in the bushes. He didn't believe the woman meant to double-cross him, but he wasn't taking needless chances in this lovely town. If only Happy Nell came to the house, well enough. If someone else was with her—that was another matter.

A few minutes after Burt Bell left, Nell turned in the twenty dollars and asked permission to knock off. It was granted. No one had been watching her, so they had no idea but that she had sold her stint. She slipped on her cloak and dark mantilla and stole down the back stairs. Then, flitting from shadow to shadow, she gained the deserted house, passing within a few feet of where Burt sat watching.

When she had disappeared in the shadows, Burt walked noiselessly on and entered the weed grown yard. A low voice called to him:

"That you, Skinny?"

"Yes."

"Follow me." She led him to a side door, pushed it open quietly, and said, "Go in. It's safe enough here."

CHAPTER II

THE ESCAPE FROM TORAL

INSIDE, and the door shut, Happy Nell struck a match and lit a piece of candle which she shaded so it made very little light. Burt saw that they were in a small room, little more than a closet. There was the door they had entered and one other, but no window. Happy Nell looked him over in the dim light. She saw that Burt had his carbine under his arm, and that instead of his one six-shooter, there was another pushed down in the waistband of his trousers.

"All bristled up like a hog goin' to war, ain't you? Body'd think you was rough. Can you sling those things?"

"A little. But what about this deal?" asked Burt impatiently.

"Well, sit down and I'll tell you a few things. I don't have to tell you that three men own this town, and the people in it, soul and body. One is Frank Fenley; and he's the main one and the brains. Another one is Jimmy Hogan, of the Golden Wheel. Jimmy's a gambler and a dirty crook, but he's part human. The third one is Captain Ramon Nuñez, a former Mexican Army officer, outlawed in his own country. I reckon if I wanted to do something to atone for the life I've lived, slipping a knife into those three would come nearer placating Heaven and squaring me on the books than anything I could do. But that would be quite a chore. Fenley and Hogan are sharks, and there's always a school of pilot fish around them, on guard. Nuñez is rarely here, but guards the outer avenues leading to this saintly sanctuary. He is just a cold killer, who kills for the love of murder. One of the things that keeps me from believing more of the Bible than I do is because it says God rained fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, and He still lets Toral get by. I——"

"Come, come! The chickens will be crowing for day in a little while. I understand that part of it. What about this deal you want to pull off?"

"I'm coming to that. The only thing I wonder at is why the United States, with plenty of soldiers to fight Indians, and Texas, with her boasted Rangers, lets such a plague spot exist. Bah! It makes me sick. Still, if I knew just one company of Rangers was coming here I'd warn them to stay away."

"Why?"

"Because they couldn't do anything. You haven't been in Toral for a while. It was always tough, but it's rotten now. They do things that couldn't happen any place else on earth. I think they know it can't last, so they just keep the back door open into Mexico and go the limit. Every man in this town is a killer, and there must be two or three hundred of them. If a few Rangers got in here they couldn't get out. Nobody can get out. Fenley offers a reward for any Ranger killed now. Yet, you've got to get out, and get away."

"That sounds reasonable and easy," grinned Burt.

"It sounds absurd, I know," snapped Happy Nell. "But here's the situation: About a year ago, Frank Fenley brought in a bookkeeper and cashier for his business, and paid him a big salary. The man's name was French Dillon. He was a white man, and decent. He came from back in the States somewhere. He had a wife and daughter that were grown, and they were decent women—about the only ones in Toral. Six months ago, Dillon's wife died. When she did, I went there and put her in her coffin and did what I could for the girl, Connie Dillon. After that, the girl was friendly with me. Not that I was fit to associate with such a girl, but the poor child had to have a friend.

"Well, Dillon wanted to get out of here after his wife died, but Fenley raised his pay to some fabulous amount, and kept him on. Then four days ago something came up in the business, something Fenley wanted Dillon to do, and Dillon let out a terrible yell about it and quit cold. Then he told Fenley what he was, and that he, Dillon, was going to shake this blighted outpost of hell. 'All right. Try and do it,' says Fenley.

"Well, Dillon thought it was just bluster on the part of Fenley, so he got ready. He and the girl and a Mexican woman, who was going along to take care of the girl and speak Spanish for them if need be, left here a little while after dark this evening—or rather yesterday evening. But—they didn't get far."

"What was wrong?"

"Nothing much. About ten minutes before you came up to the dance hall, the Mexican woman who keeps house for me came to the dance hall and called me out. She told me that Connie Dillon was at my house, hiding. She said they got a mile or two out of town and two men stopped them. They killed her father and the Mexican woman, but the girl's horse ran away and came back to town."

"Strange they didn't get the girl, too," said Burt, knowing that he had seen Dillon's and the Mexican woman's bodies.

"It isn't—when you know Frank Fenley. They'll never take that whelp into a decent hell. The reason he wouldn't let Dillon go was because he wanted the girl. Wanted to drag her down to the level of the other women in Toral. Don't you think I'd just about be as good as the woman with the red string in her window if I could get that girl out of Toral and save her from Frank Fenley?"

Burt didn't answer for a moment. He was speechless with rage. He was about ready to hunt Fenley up and take a chance on killing him, but the risk was too great. Captain Quill Cloud had sent him to investigate Toral, and he meant to be a good Ranger.

"Yes," he replied at last. "That would tie any act of Christian kindness, and beat a lot of 'em as far as a full house beats a pair of deuces. But what can be done?"

"You're going to take Connie Dillon out of Toral."

"Me! Why, Nell, I—I can't——"

"You can't turn down a chance to help a woman that's in trouble. You wouldn't stand by and see any man abuse the sorriest drab in the street. You're decent, and you couldn't do it. As for letting Frank Fenley lay his filthy paws on a clean, decent young girl like Connie . . . Hell, Skinny! Why, God won't let you lay down on the deal. Take her out of here, Skinny. Do it for me. I feel like maybe if I could pull that off, it would square me up Yonder for some of the stuff I've done. Say you'll do it, and God won't forget you when you're in a tight."

"All right," said Burt, in husky tones. "Where is she?"

"I'll bring her right here. You just wait for us." And before he could protest, Happy Nell was out the door and gone.

THE woman had wrought Burt Bell to a dangerous pitch. He would have been ready enough to kill any man who mistreated a woman. Fenley, whom he intended to kill anyway, he was doubly willing to dispose of if the opportunity came. But Burt's rage didn't blind his caution. He knew he was in a tight place; had known it since he rode into town. Had it been suspected that he was a Ranger, he would have been dead before now. He believed Happy Nell was sincere. But, still, he wasn't taking chances. He blew the candle out, and went outside and hid in the bushes a little way from the door.

There, he waited for a time that seemed ages. The fiddles and pianos were still going and he could hear the dull thud of dancing feet. He heard a rooster crow and a dog bark. These were harbingers of coming day. If Nell didn't come soon there would be no chance to get out that night. Then he heard light footsteps, and a moment later Nell appeared at the door, accompanied by a slender boy. He heard the woman whisper:

"It's all right, Connie. He'll take you out of Toral."

Then he realized that Happy Nell had disguised the girl in boy's clothes and hat, even to boots. They entered the dark room, and Burt stepped in behind them and closed the door.

When the candle was lit, Burt could dimly see the slender form in boy's clothing, with large, luminous eyes blurred from weeping, and just now, wide with fright.

"This is Skinny, Connie," said Happy Nell. "I don't know any other name for him, but I know he's a clean, decent kid and a gentleman."

The two acknowledged this strange introduction with no more than a nod and some half whispered words.

"It is nearly morning," said Burt. "If we are going to try to get out of Toral we'll have to start. Are you willing to try it with me, young lady?"

"Yes," faltered the girl. "I know I'm not safe in Toral. I'm willing to trust you, because Nell trusts you."

"You certainly can trust him," Nell said and patted the girl's shoulder reassuringly.

"What about you, Nell?" asked Burt. "If these fellows find out that you pulled this——"

"It won't make any difference. I've tossed up a quarter a dozen times: heads, I take a little white pill; tails, I shoot it out with myself. But I never had the nerve. If I go for this, it will be better than the other way. Good-by, now, and——"

Happy Nell stiffened in her tracks as a low voice sounded outside the door.

"They must have gone into that old house, Captain. We've been clean around it, and didn't see anybody."

"Huh! Ain't many people in Toral that would go into that old ruin. They may be in there, but I doubt it."

"Nuñez and his killers!" whispered Nell, and Burt softly slipped a gun from its holster and pushed open that other door, leading he knew not where, but at least out of that closet.

"Bosh! I ain't afraid of ghosts," said one of the men on the outside. "Come on. I'm going to shove the door open."

Happy Nell pushed Burt and the girl through the inner door, and whispered:

"Turn to the left and follow the wall. It's a passage with a door at the end leading outside. The key is in the door. Go out that way. I'll keep them here talking until you get away."

Holding Connie's hand, Burt felt along the wall on his left until he came to the door at the end of the passage. It was inky dark. They had reached the door, and Burt was groping for the key when three shots crashed in the little room they had just left. The door through which they had escaped flew open and something fell on the floor with a thud. The Ranger knew he had no business outside, with that gang about the place. If anyone threw light into that passage, with them in it, they would have still less business there. Just before reaching the end of the passage he had passed a door in that left wall, which must open into a room at the back of the old house. Burt pulled Connie gently back to that door, turned the knob softly and pushed her through into a big room. A broken window let in air and gave a dim light. Dawn was breaking and no start was made to leave Toral. Placing his charge against the wall by the side of the door, Burt opened it a tiny crack, and listened.

"We got 'em," said a voice at the outer door. "Make a light and let's look 'em over." There was no more emotion in that voice than if it had been wolves instead of human beings they were killing. Burt rightly surmised that the speaker was Captain Ramon Nuñez, and that the three men had fired one shot each into that room.

A light flared and then burned steadily as a candle was lit. Peering out the crack in the door, Burt could see that the light fell through the open door to the passage. On the floor he could see the pale face and blonde head of Happy Nell. His gun slipped noiselessly from the scabbard as he recalled Nell's words, "You wouldn't stand by and see any man abuse a woman."

"Huh! Nobody but poor Old Happy Nell!" said Captain Nuñez. "And we thought it was the Dillon girl."

"But there was a man with her," said one of the others.

"Sure there was, but he's gone, and I don't blame him. Poor company to be found dead with. Bring that light here and let's see what she's got on her. Somebody has been passing information out of Toral lately, and she and this fellow that was with her might have been in on the deal."

The woman had obviously been standing with her back against the door, which had no latch, but only a knob that pulled it open and shut. When she was shot, she fell back against the door, which flew open and let her fall across the passage, with her feet in the open door. Nuñez stepped through the door with a short candle in his hand and stood at the head of the body, while the other men knelt, one on each side. They were all in plain view of Burt. Nuñez was furnishing a fine shooting light, so he took the other two first, but his three shots sounded almost as one. With the last shot Nuñez staggered a step and fell. The candle went out and the master murderer would never hold another. He was dead in the company that he had ridiculed.

So, the passage was in darkness again. Burt was glad of that, for he didn't want his charge to see what lay on that floor. Slipping out the empty shells, he reloaded his pistol and pushed it into the holster. He knew they *had* to get out of the old house, now. Pistol shots in the night were no novelty in Toral, but there had been too many in that deserted house. Someone would take a look as soon as daylight came, and he didn't want to be among the things they found.

"Come on! We're going out of here," he whispered, and taking Connie's hand he led her back through the door and along the passage.

The key turned without a sound, and, opening the door a crack, he peeped out. It was still dark, but dawn was showing faintly in the east. There was no sound save the banging of one piano in a dance hall where some gang of persistent revelers still held forth. It was bedtime in Toral. They slipped out and Burt closed the door softly behind them. A little way in front of the house three horses stood together. More evidence that there had been but three men in the raiding party.

"Can you ride?" whispered Burt.

"Yes," replied the girl simply. She

didn't say how well she could ride, but that was a chance that had to be taken, along with a lot of others, so Burt didn't press the point. As a matter of fact, Connie Dillon was a wonderful horsewoman.

"All right. Wait here a moment, and I'll get a horse for you."

It was not difficult to select the best of the three horses, even in the dark. The one Burt took was a splendid animal, while the others were plug ponies. The young Ranger boosted the girl to the saddle, and a moment later mounted Old Blue and led the way out to the main street.

If they couldn't ride out of town now, they never could. Toral was asleep. There was no use trying to slip out of the place. There was but one way out, without going back through town. That was the same trail that Burt had followed into Toral. What he wanted more than anything else was to get out of that valley, over a rim rock, and back to Dunston and Captain Quill Cloud. He had learned plenty to set the old Ranger captain wild with rage.

He might have to shoot his way out of the valley, and was willing enough to do that, so far as he was concerned; but there was Connie Dillon. He had to consider her safety. He had not had even a good look at the girl's face, and now it was shaded by a broad hat. Nuñez had been a short legged, long bodied rogue, and his stirrups fitted the girl nicely. Burt noticed that she sat erect in her saddle and kept the horse well in hand. This pleased him, for they were likely to have to run for it. As it grew lighter, he appraised the clean limbed horse that Connie was riding, then glanced at the saddle. It was of ornate, hand stamped leather, and the mountings were silver. There was a rifle in the saddle scabbard, and a fine pearl handled Colt's in a holster at the saddle horn, with its long belt of cartridges wrapped around the horn. There was no mistaking one thing. They had appropriated a king's charger. What of it, he thought. He had just killed the king!

BURT wanted to take the trail straight for the mouth of the long gorge, and the gun sight notch in the rim rock where he had come into this antechamber of hell. But he knew that Connie's father and the old duenna lay dead in that trail, and he couldn't take her that way, for it was growing lighter now. So, when they reached the forks, he took the left hand, or Rock Creek trail. They had gone little more than quarter of a mile on this trail when a man rode out into the trail a little ahead of them, and stopped.

"Spur your horse into the chaparral and wait until I see what this fellow wants," said Burt.

There was not much waiting about it. The man had seen his captain's horse, and he knew that no one else ever rode it with the captain's consent. The sentry jerked his gun and fired, but he fired too late. As he pitched from his saddle, Burt whirled into the thicket and calling to Connie to follow, spurred rapidly on. He knew a trail that led across from one of the main trails to the other. He had been making for this cross trail when the sentry appeared. It would lead them into the trail that led up the gorges and on to Dunston, well beyond the place where French Dillon and his servant had been killed. In a few minutes they came out in this cross trail, and Burt stopped until the girl reached his side.

"Looks like these trails are pretty well guarded," he said. "We got just one chance, Miss Dillon, and that is to run for it. Think you can stand it?"

"I—I'll try," said the slender, white faced girl. "Anything to get out of Toral."

"All right, we're going. If we can make it ten miles, we'll be pretty safe. Keep right behind me and watch the trail ahead. If you see anybody, wheel your horse to one side, so you'll be out of the line of fire. We may have to shoot ourselves loose from this mess. Let's go."

They reached the main trail, and thundered on through the valley, gaining the mouth of the long gorge. Their horses were blowing by this time, and Burt slowed down.

"Five more miles and we'll be over the rim rock," he said encouragingly.

"Is—is there still danger?" asked Connie.

"Yes, but I think we have passed the worst," said Burt, his keen eyes scanning every bush as they went along.

A mile farther on they passed the mouth of a narrow lateral gorge on their right. Burt glanced into it, and what he saw turned him cold. Twenty mounted men were in that gorge, and not more than a hundred yards from them.

"Hold on tight!" snapped Burt. "We're going to ride." And his quirt fell across the big horse's hips, driving it on in front of him. The horse, maddened by the blow, plunged forward at a furious pace, and Old Blue kept right at its heels.

There was nothing for it now but to run. Burt knew he couldn't fight that mob. If they gave chase there was little hope, for their horses were fresh, while he and Connie had already run theirs five miles. Three miles farther on they would strike the steep climb leading up to the rim rock. Spent horses could never make that grade. The gang of men came on, whooping and yelling and firing their pistols. Burt made no move to fight back. That first mad burst of speed had taken them out of pistol range. They were more than two hundred yards in the lead, and he was trying his best to keep that distance, or increase it if possible. He knew what Old Blue could do, but what the pampered horse Connie was riding could do was another matter.

They held the lead for two miles, then Connie's horse began to lose. In vain Burt added his own quirt to hers. The horse was through. They could hear the pounding of hoofs on the rocky floor of the gorge, drawing steadily nearer. A hundred yards ahead of them was another narrow lateral gorge. It was little more than a crevice in the towering stone wall, but they needed shelter; had to have it. As they came abreast of the narrow fissure a rifle cracked behind them, and the king's charger stumbled and fell, while a wild yell went up from the pursuers. Snatching his carbine from its scabbard, Burt sprang to the ground. Seeing that Connie had rolled clear of the fallen horse, and was up, he jerked the rifle, pistol and cartridge belt from her saddle, pushed them into her hands, and said:

"Stoop low and run into that gash, quick!" Then throwing his carbine to his face, he emptied it into the approaching horseman. Several empty saddles stopped them; but only momentarily. That was all he hoped for as he darted into the narrow gorge after Connie.

A hundred feet back from the mouth of that narrow cañon lay a pile of great jagged rocks that had fallen from the top of the bluff some time in the centuries of erosion. Just as the fugitives slipped behind that pile of stone, a storm of bullets swept into the mouth of their retreat, sending chips of stone all about them.

"Keep low and close against the rocks," ordered Burt, as he took a handful of rifle cartridges from a jacket pocket and slipped them through the loading gate of his carbine. In spite of the tight place he was in, and the little hope he had of getting out of it, Burt was thinking of his horse. Just as he had emptied his gun, and turned to run for the little cañon, he had seen Old Blue squat, then dash away up the gorge. He knew the horse was hit, and was wondering how bad, when a voice outside the little nook called out:

"Let's go in and get 'em, fellows! We've got their horses, and they ain't got as much chance as a feather in hell. Come on. All together, now!"

Men swarmed in at the mouth of the little gorge, but that pile of rocks was a masked battery of death. There was a crevice in the rocks which spouted fire and lead. Burt knew he had no cartridges to waste, and he wasn't wasting any. He had to check that first rush or the game was lost before it began. If he succeeded, they'd be more careful after that. By the time he had emptied his own carbine, they had checked. Before the other was empty, they had withdrawn. Three lay dead at the entrance, while a dozen had staggered away, more or less seriously hurt. An altercation was going on among them, and Burt could hear the raised voices:

"If you want anybody to go into that furnace of hell, go yourself!" stormed one of the men.

"Well, no use to get raw about it," said another, who was evidently the leaderr, and had hung back when the rush started. "We'll just have to take a little more time and starve 'em out. They ain't got no grub, no water, and danged little air in that place. They won't last long."

Burt Bell knew those fellows meant to be heard. He knew, too, that when the sun got straight overhead and poured down into their hiding place, with all those white rocks about them, it would be like a furnace. He could stand it all right. He had stood worse many a time. But what about that poor little girl? Burt still looked upon her as a little child who had obviously been nurtured and cared for all her life. To him she looked so helpless there among the rocks at his feet. There were dark circles under her eyes from a sleepless night of grief. Her face was stained with tears and dust. She was an object of pity. Something for any real man to fight to the end for, but certainly not at that time to fall in love with. And Frank Fenley wanted to drag her to the dance halls of Toral. Burt's gorge rose at the thought.

All this time, Ranger Bell was keeping his eyes on the entrance to their fortress. They might try to rush again, but he doubted it. They'd wait until thirst and weakness made him blind, and then rush him again. Wait like wolves waiting for a crippled calf to get down before they set their fangs to its throat. He glanced up through the narrow blue slit above him and saw a lone buzzard circling in the sky. Perhaps it was the dead horse, and perhaps that buzzard had quite another feast in mind.

At noon, when the sun poured down into the gorge mercilessly, and no breath of wind could strike them, the heat became intolerable. It was then that the outlaws began their system of torture. Just outside the entrance one yelled:

"Hurry up with that water!" Then, a moment later, "Gosh! That's the coolest, best water I've tasted in a year."

Burt glanced down at Connie. Her face was set as stone, except that her chin quivered. That was going to cost somebody something. The men went on with their tantalizing talk. Presently one threw a quantity of water, and it splattered on the stones in the mouth of the little cañon. Just the point of an elbow showed, but that was enough. The Ranger's rifle cracked, and that arm would never be used again to commit murder. It was a soft nosed bullet and the flattening against the bone almost severed the arm.

If Burt had been by himself, he would have gone out of there, and taken his chance of shooting it out with what was left of the gang. But, when he looked at Connie, crouched there among those blistering rocks, he knew he couldn't take a chance on being killed and leaving her to these wolves.

THE sun slipped on to the west, and there was shade again, but no shade could ever refund what the burning sun had drawn from them. Nothing but water could save them. It was almost night when the leader said, loud enough to be plainly heard:

"Slim, don't you reckon we could rustle a stick or two of dynamite? That would bring 'em out, pronto."

"Shore! I hadn't thought of that. One of the boys can lope into town and get some."

"Well, start him to loping, and tell him to ride reg'lar and hard. I don't want to lose a whole night's sleep on account of this little mess."

It is strange what things come to the human mind in moments of danger. Toral and its leading citizen, Frank Fenley, had written on Burt Bell's memory a frightful list of misdeeds for which he hoped they would be punished. The thought that Fenley's men would mangle the body of a young girl with dynamite, rather than see her slip out of his filthy paws, was the final count. It did two things. It determined Burt to take Connie out of that place alive, and it wrote a whole chapter in the story of Toral. Up to that time, Burt Bell had hated only Frank Fenley. He had played poker with the other men of the town, had drank with them and danced in the same old-fashioned square dances with them. There were men in that band out there for whom he had bought drinks. But, never again. The murder of two women, that he knew of, the willingness to murder this innocent girl, merited all the punishment he could help give Toral and its citizens. A little while after dark, Burt leaned down to the girl and whispered:

"Think you could walk?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can."

"Fine! Get up and hold onto my arm. Walk as light as you can. We don't want to make any noise."

Burt left the rifles and the extra pistol. It was a hazardous thing he meant to try, and he wanted no extra burden. Instead of going toward the opening in the big draw, he went to the bluff and felt his way back into the narrow crevice. During those hours of torture he had studied every crack and seam in that bluff. At last they came to where the gorge apparently ended. That was the very thing Burt wanted to know. He didn't think it ended there, and he was right. It turned abruptly, and twenty feet farther on began a narrow slide that sloped up toward the sky.

"Now," whispered Burt, "we have a choice of two things. We can stay in here until they blow us out with dynamite, or we can try to climb that, and risk falling and breaking our necks. I leave the choice to you."

"No, no! There is no choice. Go ahead. Maybe you can climb out. If I can't—it won't make much difference."

"It will make this much. You go out, or I don't go. You take the lead, and I'll follow. Don't shove down any more rock than you can help. Take it slow. It's a long way to the top. When you get tired, stop and rest. Up you go."

Slowly Connie crept up the steep chute, with Burt but a little way behind her. At one place the wall rose sheer for five or six feet. Connie stopped until Burt came up and asked what the trouble was.

"We'll have to go back," she said with a sob in her voice. "It is so straight up here that it leans over my head."

"Can you reach the top of the straight place?"

"No."

"Well, just put your hands as high as you can, and we'll find something out."

Finding a solid and secure foothold, he seized her ankles, and said:

"Stiffen your legs and up you go."

That was an odd thing for a bashful young fellow like Burt to say to a lady, but he was not thinking of conventionalities just then. Nor was Connie, for her hundred and fifteen pounds were going up as if she were a reed. More than that, before she went up a foot, her hands were above a level shelf that extended back farther than she could reach. In another minute she was on the shelf, and to her surprise, Burt's head and shoulders were above the ledge. That was simple enough. He had found foothold on the sides of the crevice, and followed right up after her.

"Let's rest a bit," he said, as he dragged himself onto the ledge. "That kind of stuff is hard on the wind. We're going too fast. We'll get out of breath and can't make the next rough place. We're more than halfway to the top now. I can feel the wind blowing."

As they sat resting, Burt was thinking. He wondered if there was a notch in the rim rock at the top of this slide, or did it extend far out over the little crevice, making it impossible for them to climb out to the open when they reached it. What had made this groove in the solid stone, anyway? He recalled that Happy Nell had said: "Do this, and God will remember you when you are in a tight." Connie roused him from his reverie by saying:

"I'm rested, if you are."

"Fine! Go ahead, but take it slow."

They went ahead for some time, and then Connie slipped and came tumbling back on him.

"Steady!" he called, as he caught her and braced his feet against the rough side of the groove. "What's the trouble up there?"

"Why—why it's slick, and wet."

"Wet! Thank God! It's a seep spring! Try it again. I'll boost your feet."

FIVE minutes later they had drunk their fill of pure, cool water from a little pocket in the stone and were resting on a dry shelf above the spring. Burt's mental query about what made that groove in the stone was answered. Throughout the centuries, with eternal constancy, that little spring, in wet seasons, had kept on the job of whittling a way down to the bottom of the great gorge. From where they sat, Burt could see the scrub cedars at the top of the bluff, outlined against the sky. It couldn't be more than thirty feet.

"Just sit still and rest while I take a look up here," he said and, rising, started on up the groove. But it was not a groove any more, just a broad slope that led up to the cedars. He was back in a minute.

"Lets take another drink for luck, and go from here!" he cried "It's all over now but the shouting!"

A few minutes later they were above the rim rock, their hats off and the cool night wind fanning their hot faces.

"Well, we're out of that trap, thank God!" said Burt fervently. "I've seen a whole lot of places and a whole lot of ways that I'd rather die than be blown to rags by dynamite in that hole."

"Do—do we have to die, at all—I mean now?" asked Connie.

"I hope not, lady, but they's an awful hard deal ahead of us, and it may be too much for you. It's about two mile from here to the trail, and it's thirty mile from there to Dunston. I got an idea you never walked much in high heeled boots."

"No, but—I'd walk barefoot to get out of this terrible place."

"You wouldn't walk very far barefooted on these rocks and pincushion cactus. We'll walk a while, and when you get tired just sing out and we'll stop and rest a while. Let's go."

They had walked a mile when Burt saw that the girl was staggering and holding on by sheer grit. He stopped, and she panted:

"I—I'm sorry, but—I believe I'll have to rest."

He found a smooth, flat stone, so there would be no danger of a rattlesnake, and sat her down on it. Then he went on talking to her about all sorts of things to take her mind off their plight and her troubles.

"What is your name?" she asked suddenly.

"Why, didn't Nell tell you?"

"She said it was 'Skinny,' but that isn't a name."

"No, I reckon it ain't," said Burt, slowly, "but it's the only name that anybody in Toral knows for me. I——"

"Oh, please pardon me! I—I didn't mean to be inquisitive. If you don't want people to know your name, I have no right——"

"Sometimes I don't." And Burt spoke in a musing tone. "But I think I'd like for you to know it, and this may be the last chance I'll have to tell you. My name is Burton Bell."

"Are you a cowboy, Mister Bell?"

"I used to be, but I'm not now."

"What do you— No, no! I don't mean——"

Connie had run into a pocket. To the best of her knowledge of the country west of the Pecos, men who rode were either cowboys or outlaws, and often both.

"Yes'm, I reckon you do. You've sorty taken me on yo' faith in Happy Nell's judgment, and you got a right to know what you drew in the deal. I don't reckon it'll be a secret much longer. I'm a Texas Ranger."

"Ranger! Did you know that there is a reward for dead Rangers in Toral?"

"No, ma'm. I didn't know that when I went in there. I been reminded of it pretty reg'lar ever since I got into town last night."

"Where are we going now?"

"If our feet hold out I aim to go to company headquarters, at Dunston."

"And what will the Rangers do when they know what happened to you in Toral?"

"I don't know, ma'm. Right smart, I expect."

"Will they go to Toral?"

"I wouldn't wonder they went there some, yes'm."

"How many men are there in your company?"

"Eighteen in all."

"That isn't many, is it?"

"Yes'm. That's right smart—Rangers."

"If they were all like you it would be."

"They're not all like me. The rest are real Rangers. I'm just the kid in the company."

Connie reserved her reply to that. From her viewpoint, Burt's actions had been anything but kiddish. They got up presently and struggled on across the rocky plain. They made another mile, and this time they stopped to rest at the trail, just where it broke over the rim rock through the gun sight notch.

"See those lights twinkling yonder?" asked Burt.

"Yes. What are they?"

"The lights of Toral, and——"

"Hush! Listen!"

The drum of many hoofbeats was coming steadily toward them from somewhere out on the plain.

CHAPTER III

OLD BLUE COULD ALMOST TALK

ABOUT noon that day, when the leader of the Toralese picket was torturing Burt and Connie with his talk about fine, cool water, Captain Quill Cloud sat in the scant shade of his tent. He was cursing, as usual. This time it was because he had received orders to protect two more defenseless hamlets west of the Pecos from the ravages of desperadoes. Hearing hoofs pounding the trail, he looked up to see Old Blue come storming into camp without a rider.

"Now what the hell has happened to that kid?" demanded Captain Quill of the world, known and unknown.

Grizzled old Sergeant Dugan caught the horse, but Blue cavorted at the end of the bridle, and refused to be quieted. He was foaming with sweat and his eyes were staring, while he breathed in great, heaving gasps.

"Clean loco," said the sergeant.

"Loco, hell!" stormed Captain Quill. "He can't talk, but he's doin' his damnedest to tell what happened. Look him over and see what's the matter with him."

Two or three other men came up and held the horse by main force while Dugan examined him. Finally, Dugan pointed to the trouble.

"Yes," snorted the captain. "I see it. Crazy, is he? You'd be crazy, too, if you had a bullet burn clean across the inside of yo' hind leg, high up as that is, and it full of sweat and burning you up alive. Get a bucket of water and wash it. Then put some bacon grease on it."

"He won't let us get to him, Captain. Won't let us touch him."

"Touch, hell! Throw that horse and doctor him." And Captain Quill Cloud turned and strode toward his tent.

About the time they had finished the job, and turned Old Blue into the temporary corral they had built, Captain Quill strode out of his tent all booted and spurred. He had two pistols at his belt, and a carbine in his hand. No man in the company had ever seen two guns on his captain before, and they all looked at him in wonder.

"Yes, I got on two," he snapped. "If you got two, you better put 'em on. Saddle up. We're going to ride, and I think we're going at least halfway to hell. Pack a couple of braunks with a light camp kit and some blankets. Put the kid's saddle on an extra horse and take it along. He'll need it—if we find him alive. If we find him dead—which is more likely—we'll need it to bring him in on."

Old Sergeant Dugan had rangered with Captain Quill since they were boys, and he knew his captain as no other man knew him. He knew that for some reason Quill Cloud set a lot of store by this boy, and he guessed what that reason was. Cloud had made more good Rangers than any officer in the service. He knew men, knew the stuff Rangers were made of and, selecting his raw material with shrewd care, he turned out real Rangers.

In half an hour the company was on the march, taking the same trail that Burt Bell had taken twenty-four hours earlier. They couldn't make the speed that Old Blue had made, driving their pack ponies, but they moved along, watching the trail, and thinking they might find Burt Bell, either dead or too badly wounded to ride. Captain Quill's stubby gray mustache wriggled and writhed frantically, as he muttered and cursed:

"That braunk was shot from behind!" he growled. "Not just common killers, but cold murderers, that shoot a man in the back. Damn a man, or any other man, that would do a thing like that. If that boy has been potted like a wolf, without being given any sort of chance, and I find it out, I'll have a pair of ears for every damn finger and toe he's got. I will, damn me!"

Night came on and darkness fell, but they were still some miles short of the rim rock. When they reached it, far into the night, the company came to a halt. Crouched behind a clump of scrub cedars a few feet away, Burt and Connie listened.

"You know this country pretty well, don't you, Dugan?" growled Captain Quill Cloud. "Where are we and what's down in that hole?"

"Why, it's twenty years since I was in here," replied Dugan. "We trailed old Victorio and some of his braves into that place. My recollection is that this is the edge of the rim rock, and that there is a long gorge down there that leads into the Rio Grande Valley below here."

"Know where Toral is?"

"No sir, I don't. Toral wasn't born when I was in here. The only towns west of the Pecos then were Old Ysleta and a few shacks at El Paso."

"It's the Rangers!" whispered Burt to Connie. "We're all right now. I'll speak to them in a moment."

"I—I'm so thankful," sighed Connie. "I thought sure we were caught again."

"Hell of a note!" roared Captain Quill. "Trying to slip up on something, and don't know where it's at. No telling what we'll stumble into, all because we don't know where Toral is. Why, dammit, I——"

"I know where Toral is," came a voice from a little cedar not fifty feet away, where Burt had crept, leaving Connie where she was.

"Who's that?" snapped Captain Quill.

"Private Bell, sir." And Burt stepped out from his little cedar.

"Bell! What the scorchin' middle furnace of hell are you doing prowling around out here on the prairie afoot like a damn kioty?"

"It's a right smart story, Captain. This ain't a very good place to tell it, and it ain't a very good place to talk loud. We've got to hide."

"Hide, hell!" roared Captain Quill. "What has M Company got to hide from? It ain't never hid yet."

"I know," drawled Burt, "but a hunter hides from game when he wants to slip up on it. I'd like to find a quiet place to make my report."

"Oh, you would? Well, you seem to know this country. Where's a good place to camp?"

"About ten miles south of here there is a place where a few little springs keep some water in pot holes. It's the head of another draw that leads into the valley below this one."

"All right. It's a long way to go to camp, but if you say so. Ain't they no water in this draw ahead of us?"

"Yes, sir. But they's also a good deal else in there, and we can't see it well at night."

"I see. What's that bunch of twinkling lights?"

"The lights of Toral, sir."

"Huh! I'm damn glad to know it. I was beginning to think Toral was a myth that had been created by the adjutant general, sorty like Santa Claus, and the Sandman, and them. Crawl onto that extra horse and lead out for your camping place!"

"There's a lady with me, sir."

"What! A lady! Why didn't you say so? Let me set up here and cuss my head off right before her! We have only one extra horse, so——"

"She can take it and I'll walk."

"Walk nothing! Put the lady on the horse, and you get up behind Dugan. Let's go."

BURT called Connie, and she came timidly forth from her hiding place. Captain Quill Cloud's rough voice and his blistering oaths had terrified her almost as much as the outlaws had done, but she didn't hear him swear again. He almost swore when he saw what looked to be a slender boy flash into the saddle on that extra horse and rein the animal into the trail. As they moved out, setting a course by the stars almost south, Captain Quill dropped to the rear, where he kept up a steady patter of profanity at low breath, like a monk telling his beads, while the caterpillar wriggled and twisted in fury.

Captain Quill Cloud didn't mean to be wicked. Indeed he wasn't wicked. He tried to be a Christian gentleman, and believed he was one. More than that, he had a heart in him as big as a house. That very day, Sergeant Dugan, who never swore, had made a remark just after Captain Quill had given way to a specially eloquent and artistic burst of profanity.

"Yes, I know it's a habit, Dugan, and a mighty bad one for a Christian like me," Quill had said, "and I'm going to quit it. But when I get a lot of fool orders from the adjutant general's office, written by some fool that don't know as much about this country west of the Pecos as he knows about China, why . . . Hellfire and damnation! Excuse me, Dugan, but when I think about that, if I don't cuss I'll just naturally bust wide open. Damn me!"

So, the worst thing about having a woman in the outfit was that Captain Quill was likely to explode, for he would never swear in the presence of a woman, knowingly. As he rode along he was wondering what could be done with this girl. He might send her to Dunston, but she would be no better off there than in the Ranger camp; probably not as well off, for his men would respect her. There was not a woman in Dunston, and the nearest women he knew anything about were in Fort Stockton, in one direction, and El Paso the other; and both places were miles and miles away. That, of course, was not considering the ladies of Toral, if any, as human women.

"She'll be safe enough in camp," he muttered, "but what the hell can we do with her when we ride into Toral?"

The place Burt led them to was an idyllic spot. It was on high mesa, yet one could ride within half a mile of it and never see it. Captain Quill was sure they had traveled ten miles, and yet could see no sign of broken country, when suddenly the riders in front of him began to disappear. They were riding down a steep, narrow trail that led into a wide depression about half a mile long. It was above the rim rock, and at the southwest end it opened to the Rio Grande draws, becoming a deep cañon. There was but the one entrance to it, for it narrowed at the lower end, and broke over a sheer bluff.

When all the riders were down, Burt dismounted and tied a rope across the narrow cut they had followed, making it fast to a little bush on each side. He explained that they could now turn their horses loose to graze, as there was no other way out. At the upper end of the valley there were several little springs. The water from them flowed out, sank to the rock and then spread toward the lower end, subirrigating the entire little valley, which was covered with lush grass. The depression was more than a hundred feet deep, and there was a considerable grove of trees in it that couldn't be seen from out on the plain. Captain Quill described it, when daylight came, as "a place that God must have made on purpose."

Camp was made well back in the grove, and when Burt and Connie had eaten some cold food and drunk coffee that was made hurriedly they were considerably refreshed. There was a small tent in the outfit which Captain Quill Cloud carried since he had become stiff in the joints, but which was rarely set up. This was now stretched between two trees, and Captain Cloud said:

"Now, young lady, I got a daughter that looks about like you. You'll be as safe in that little tent as you would be anywhere on earth. And what you need is sleep. There's a pallet in there. Good night."

For an hour after Connie went into the tent, and straightway into a sleep of exhaustion, Captain Quill and his men squatted in a circle far enough away from the camp that their low conversation would not disturb the sleeper. Ranger Burt Bell made a detailed report of his scouting, including the day's battle for his life and the life of the young woman who had been entrusted to him.

"Kill women, do they?" snorted Captain Quill. "Offer a reward for Rangers' ears, same as if they were kioties. Smugglers, killers; got everything mean, opium joints and all!" And then if the grass wasn't withered around where they sat, cursing wouldn't do it. When he was out of breath, he stopped a moment, and said: "What's yo' idea about cleaning up this place, Bell?"

"My idea is that you won't make any report of your raid on Toral."

"Why won't I report it. Mean I won't go there?"

"No sir, it's like this. Best I could make out, this French Dillon and his daughter, and poor old Happy Nell, were the last real humans in the place. All the rest had got out. What happens when we get in there won't be fit to report."

"Huh! I see what you mean. Go ahead. How do you think we better tackle the job?"

"My idea is to lay right in here until tomorrow evening. Then we'll go down this draw, work up the river, and shut Toral's back door into Mexico. After that——"

"Yes, after that!" growled Captain Quill. "Do you know this Frank Fenley, the big bull of Toral?"

"Yes, I know him." And there was a cold hardness in Burt's tone that didn't escape the captain.

"All right, kid," he drawled. "Just so you don't let him get away. Hunt your blankets now. Men can't work without sleep."

"I'd like to go to Dunston," said Burt.

"Dunston? What for?"

"Got to get a horse and saddle for the young lady. Then I left my carbine in that trap. There's an extra one at quarters and I may need it. I'll sleep a while when I get there, and get back here a little while after noon."

"Go ahead. You've earned the right to dress for that Toral party, to suit yourself."

A few minutes later Burt Bell rode away from the camp, to add another journey of more than twenty miles to that long and hazardous day's trail. The Rangers rolled in their blankets and went to sleep.

IT WAS almost noon when Connie awoke. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the tent above her. She had merely pulled off her boots and jacket, unbuttoned the collar of the woolen shirt she wore, and went to sleep. Now she had to look about a moment before she could quite locate herself. Memory of the Ranger camp came to her, and at the same time she heard a soft, drawling voice say:

"I'll raise you two more whole beans."

"Just let me take one mo' little peep at my keerds," replied another voice.

Connie crawled to the tent flap and peered out. Six grim faced Rangers were playing poker on a blanket, as if they had no other business in life. A little way from them, Captain Quill sat on the ground, leaning against a tree. The caterpillar was wriggling, in silent prayer—perhaps. Presently, having drawn on boots and jacket, and buttoned her collar, Connie stepped out and the captain was on his feet in an instant. Mr. Bell? Why he had gone to Dunston, to get a horse and saddle for her. Yes, he would be back any time, now. Dinner would be ready in a few minutes.

Connie went to the spring to make her ablutions, and she was entranced with the wild beauty of the place. When she got back to camp, dinner was ready and she was ready for it, rough fare as it was. Dinner over, Captain Quill Cloud took Connie a little way from the camp, and they sat down in the shade of a tree.

"Little lady," said the captain. "I've been puzzling my brains about what to do with you. I guess you know that the company is on the way to clean up Toral. There's no place in a hundred miles of here that I know of where there is a woman. I could detail a couple of men to stay here with you, but——"

"No, no! You'll need all your men. Toral is a terrible place."

"That's what I was thinking. But you can't stay here by yourself."

"I wouldn't want to stay here. I'll go with you."

"You have no idea what that will be like. It'll be no place for a woman."

"It can't be worse than what I went through yesterday."

"Maybe not. Tell me about yesterday."

Connie told the story, and when she had finished, the captain said:

"That ain't just the way Burt told it to me last night. You've told me all he told, but you've told more. He didn't tell me about taking all them chances, and like that."

"He wouldn't take credit for half his bravery," said Connie. "I know he would be like that, but—Captain Quill Cloud, Mister Bell is the bravest man in the world!"

"Don't know about that," said the old Ranger captain drily. "I ain't seen 'em all in a pinch. I don't think Bell is much afraid of boogers."

"He isn't afraid of anything on earth."

"I think you're mistaken," and Captain Quill Cloud's mustache wiggled in a jolly grin. "I'm pretty sure he's afraid of you. He's about the most bashful chap I ever saw. How old are you?"

"Twenty," replied Connie.

"Oh, I thought you were a little girl, with that outfit on. If you're that old, you can have your own way about what you do. Women usually do, anyway."

"Then, when the Rangers ride for Toral, I ride with them. I can't fight, but I can hold horses. I have a right to see something happen to Toral for what it has done to me."

"How on earth did your father ever come to take you to such a place?"

"Father had been in a small business of his own and went broke. Mister Fenley offered him an attractive salary to go to Toral. Mother and I wanted to help him get on his feet again, so we agreed to go. We had heard that the people in Western towns were rough, but we never dreamed of a place like Toral. Indeed, it wasn't so bad when we first went there and there were several respectable families in town. Then it began to get worse. The other good people gradually left. Father and I were the last to leave, and—we waited too long."

Captain Quill went on asking her questions for a while, and then he said:

"Well, we won't start until night. You've got until then to make up your mind what you want to do."

"It's already made up," said Connie simply and, rising, she strolled away toward the head of the basin.

"I reckon God knew what he was about when He made some women the way He did," mused Captain Quill as he watched Connie walk away. "The Kid said this girl had more nerve than any other woman in the world. She just about went through hell yesterday, and it didn't bluff her. I'll bet him two to one that he don't know yet how much nerve she's got."

CONNIE strolled on to where the water from a spring trickled into a basin in the rock, filled it, then seeped away, to do its mite toward irrigating the little valley. There were half a dozen tiny sun perch in the little basin, and she sat down in the shade of a small tree to watch them. From time to time she let her eyes roam over the wild beauty of the little retreat. It was a lovely place. She had come to the end of an epoch in her life. Her world, the world she had known, was gone. With it, her girlhood was gone. She was a woman now, facing the cold realities of life.

Her father had been the last relative that she knew of. They had been broke when they went to Toral. He had started out of there with five thousand dollars in gold and currency. The killers had obviously taken it. She was a pauper. What would she do, where would she go, when the cleaning of Toral was over? Perhaps she wouldn't go anywhere. Perhaps she would go as poor, misguided Happy Nell had gone. What did it matter? Men died in battle. Probably some of those Rangers would die in battle at Toral. What more glorious death than to die trying to make the world decent and a fit place for human beings to live? Even Burt Bell might die in that battle, or be wounded. She started uneasily at the thought. She had never seen a man like this young Ranger. He was a boy, in many ways. Women went to war and nursed the wounded on battlefields. What better way could she serve? Yes, her mind was made up; she'd go.

As yet, she didn't realize why she was going, didn't realize the terror that awaited in Toral. She knew nothing of the awful volcano of rage that was seething in the honest heart of Captain Quill Cloud. He was perfectly calm, and she didn't know that when he was calm he was most to be feared. She hadn't heard the terrible burst of rage he had expressed when Burt told him of women being murdered at Toral and of every kind of vice and lawlessness being openly indulged in. Toral was in Texas, and Cloud was a Texas Ranger, sworn to uphold the peace, dignity, and decency of his State. At last, her mind definitely made up, Connie strolled back to camp.

As she approached the camp, Burt Bell rode in and dismounted. He was riding Old Blue and was leading the horse he had ridden away. Somewhere, he had found another saddle.

"Come here, Miss Connie," he called, "and let's see if these stirrups are right for you."

He offered his hand for a step, and Connie went up into the saddle. After that he adjusted the stirrup straps and laced them securely. He didn't ask questions about whether she was going with them. Seemed to take it as a matter of course. There was nowhere else for her to go. When the stirrups were adjusted to her liking, he assisted her to dismount, and she went on to the tent. He unsaddled the horses. And when he laid his saddle down by a tree he handled it carefully. There was a considerable roll at the cantle of it. A first aid kit, possibly, for there were apt to be wounds; and Burt was a thoughtful fellow.

They ate supper well before night, mounted and climbed out of the basin, tying the rope across the trail to keep the pack ponies from getting away while they were gone. The red light of the setting sun fell on the grim faces of the Rangers and the pale, set face of Connie Dillon, as Burt led them through a gap in the edge of the rim rock and down into the deep gorge below their retreat. Here they halted, and Captain Quill said:

"Sure you know the way, Burt?"

"Yes, sir. There isn't a gorge, draw, nor trail in twenty miles of Toral that I don't know. I learned 'em, just to be able to do what I'm doing now."

"All right, lead out. But I don't like for Miss Dillon to be in the lead, if we run into trouble."

"There'll be no danger of trouble for a while yet," replied Burt, and turning into the rocky trail, he rode on down the wild gorge with Connie close behind him, just as they had come out of Toral the day before.

It was dusk in the gorge, but the last sunlight was still topping the cedars with gold, out on the wild escarpment. Burt estimated it as fifteen miles to Toral. Even on a rough trail they would reach the town long before midnight.

CHAPTER IV

CAPTAIN QUILL BEATS NEB'S RECORD

FIVE miles below the rim rock, the gorge began to widen. Burt drew into an elbow of the winding cañon and stopped.

"Now what?" asked Captain Quill Cloud as he came up and stopped.

"It's just half a mile to the mouth of the gorge," said Burt. "From there to Toral is about seven miles. The way lays across the valley, then right up the river, and there's an open trail through the willows and mesquite, but it won't be much of a place to talk."

"What is there to talk about?"

"Well, you're leading the company, of course, but I should think we ought to understand what we're going to do."

"You get us into Toral and we'll do the rest," snapped Captain Quill.

"Excuse me, but I don't believe this place can be handled like any other town. Farther back in the State, when a company of Rangers rides into a town it becomes quiet, because most of the people either fear or respect the law. In Toral they'll do neither. Frank Fenley openly offers a reward for dead Rangers. There are from two to three hundred killers in Toral. We want to inflict the greatest possible damage, with the least possible loss to ourselves."

"That sounds sane enough," said Captain Quill Cloud. "If you've got a plan let's have it."

"Well, sir, we are going up to their back door. I think we can close it and catch them in their own trap. If we don't, all the big ones will get across into Mexico and come back as soon as this thing blows over."

"How do you aim to close the back door?"

"It's a ford on the river and two boats. I'll undertake to close that by myself. When that's done, the town should be set on fire. There's not a place in it that doesn't deserve to be burnt. I'll undertake to do that, too."

"Do you aim to do it all?"

"No, sir. That will be a very small part of it. At the first alarm of fire, there'll be plenty for everybody to do. These killers will fight. I don't think they'll stand long, and when they find that they can't cross the river, most of them will make a break for the rough country on this side. The women will all get out as soon as the fire starts, and when the men see they're losing the fight, they'll follow the women to the roughs."

"As I understand it, you propose to stop the crossing and set the town on fire. How many men do you need for that?"

"Just one, to hold my horse," replied Burt. "I think I can do that better than anyone else, because I know the place better."

"I'll go along and hold your horse," said Connie.

Captain Quill came near swearing in her presence that time, but she begged and he finally gave in, with the thought that she would be in no more danger holding Burt's horse than she was likely to be in a little later, anyway.

"If we can set the town on fire good," Burt went on, "we'll have them where we want them. We'll stop a half a mile this side of town. I'll go up, close the back door, set the town on fire, then come back to the company. After that, you lead us to the fight."

"All right," snapped Captain Quill Cloud. "Lead out. Let's get on the job."

The company filed on down the gorge, with Burt and Connie still in the lead. It was a crazy scheme, the captain told himself, but Bell knew the place, and he had come out of there the day before and brought the girl with him. The thing Burt proposed could do no harm, even if it didn't work. In spite of himself, the old Ranger captain believed in this boy. They reached the river and took the trail along the bank, through the willows.

Meantime, a conference was going on in Toral. There were just two members present, Frank Fenley and Jimmy Hogan. Captain Ramon Nuñez, the third member of the triumvirate of thieves, was unavoidably detained. Being dead, he couldn't well attend the meeting. Fenley and Hogan were both big men and nearing fifty. Hogan was the fitter of the two, because he drank less and slept more than Fenley. Frank Fenley had baggy pouches under his eyes, and just now he was worried.

"Jimmy," he said, "there's something rotten about all this stuff that's been going on. Captain Nuñez wasn't an easy man to kill, and Happy Nell didn't kill him. She had nothing on her but a knife. Nuñez and the other men each got a bullet through his head. Then the captain's horse was taken. That was bad enough. But when the gang jumped those two fellows in the gorge, they were close to our main cache of opium and the like. It was no ordinary gun slinger that stood up and shot three men from their saddles, then holed up in that gulch with his partner before anybody could get him. On top of that, when they tried to rush the gulch, he got three more and crippled a dozen. Out of twenty men, there were only six that wasn't either dead or crippled."

"Well, we can get more men," said Hogan.

"Yes, we can get more men, but that don't settle this mess. Somebody went out of here, and no telling how much he knows."

"Went out? How'd anybody go out? Britt told me that they threw two sticks of dynamite into that gulch, and a thousand tons of rock fell into it."

"Oh, yes. He told me that, too, but I want to tell you that gun slinger was too wise to stick in there until they smoked him out."

"Maybe so. Where's the Dillon girl?" asked Hogan.

"That's what I'd like to know. No one has seen her."

"I've told you often," growled Hogan, "that sooner or later you'd go crazy over a woman and gum the whole works. If you'd only let Dillon and that girl go . . . When a fellow gets your age——"

"Oh, go to hell!" said Fenley, wearily. "If I'd let Dillon go, the Texas Rangers and half the United States Army would be in here right now. He knew too much. That's why I didn't let him go. If the girl ever gets out and gets a hearing anywhere, it'll be just as bad."

"Well, the back door's open. You know what we can do."

"Yes, and I want you to start the work at once. Get the heads of the different outfits to packing. I want all the money in Toral, except a little change, across the river by daylight. If this is a false alarm, we can bring it back, but I just feel it in my bones that Old Man Trouble is on our trail. All the riders are out guarding the trails leading east, and I don't see how anybody can get in here. But, still, I'm uneasy."

THE Ranger company stopped half a mile below Toral, as agreed. Then Burt and Connie rode slowly along the river bank. They were within a stone's throw of a shack at the river end of the street when they stopped, and could hear the familiar sound of squeaking fiddles and tin pan pianos. Burt dismounted, passed his bridle rein to Connie and silently untied the roll from the back of his saddle; took it a little way from the horses, and spread it on the ground.

A minute later, he crept down to the water's edge and followed the bank to the ford, then waded into the river. He knew that ford. Had crossed it barefoot, at low water, a dozen times. The river was very low. The ford was just above a rapid which was caused by an immense flat rock fold that reached all the way across the stream. Fifty feet from the Texas shore was a crevice in the rock that was from three to four inches wide, and ran all the way across, with shallow water pouring over the rock and falling through the crevice into a cavern beneath.

Burt appeared to be hunting for something in the crevice, but each time he stooped, he left a little block of light wood floating permanently on the rippling water. As the third block floated at its anchor, something flashed in Burt's hand. It was a piece of punk wood, fitted into a cartridge shell, and another shell slipped over it. That way it would keep fire for hours. Cowboys often used them to light cigarets on windy days. It was useful in this case because it made no flare when lighted. He touched the punk to the top of the last block, and there was a sparkle. Passing on quickly, he touched it to the other two, with the same result. Then he ran swiftly out of the ford and onto the two boats that lay just below, tied up to the willows on the bank. He reached down and dropped a package lightly on each of the boats, then scurried on to where he had left his package on the ground, near where Connie held the horses.

He picked up a long willow switch which had the thin end sharpened. On the ground lay half a dozen little balls. These were nothing but balls of clay, wrapped with a coating of wicking, and the whole saturated with turpentine. He stuck a ball on the switch, touched it with the piece of punk, and it flamed. He swung the switch, and the ball roared through the air and fell fair on the roof of the Golden Wheel just as the earth shook and every window in the town rattled. Burt paid no attention to the rumbling but went on throwing balls. Five out of the six landed on flimsy roofs and stuck. That clay had been powdered and then saturated with turpentine. A stiff breeze was coming from the west, across the river, and the flames danced merrily. Burt vaulted to his saddle, and they scampered away through the willows to where the Rangers waited.

Burt knew that under the broad shelving rock over which the ford crossed there was a cavern, but he didn't know until later that it was twenty feet deep, and that his three charges of dynamite had crashed an opening as many feet wide, through which the pent-up waters above swirled with a roar. A horseman, making a dash for the Mexican side, found it out a few minutes later, only to be drowned in the whirling rapids that sucked through the gash.

"I have to report that the ferry boats are destroyed, sir," said Burt, "and I think the ford is ruined."

"And what are those lights?"

"The lights of Toral, sir. Five houses are on fire, and nothing on earth can put them out."

"Good work! Now, we'll ease up and see what can be done. You and the young lady keep to the rear. You've done your work for the present." And the column moved forward toward the river end of the main street.

Fenley and Hogan were still in Fenley's richly furnished office talking, when the crash came. They sprang from their seats and dashed into the street in time to see the last three balls of flame sail onto house roofs. It was a moment before they recovered their senses, and then Fenley cried:

"They're coming from the riverfront. Get some men after them, Hogan!"

Twenty men jerked their guns, and with Hogan at their head, ran for the river. They got there in time to see the horseman dash into the stream, ride fifty feet, and be swept away by the flood. No other living soul was in sight.

"He's in here, fellows!" yelled Hogan. "Spread out and get him!"

The crowd divided, some going up the bank, and some down. The dozen that turned downstream were led by Jimmy Hogan. He hadn't noticed the fire yet, or he would have been trying to save the money from the Golden Wheel. It was just as well, for he would never need money again. The advance of the Rangers, with Captain Quill at their head, came out of the willows, and were fired on. That was all the raging old fire-eater required. He felt a bullet bite into the fleshy part of his forearm, and saw one of his men reel in the saddle and swing his horse into the willows. Another second and Hogan's party were wiped out, Hogan himself falling among the first. The party that had gone upstream heard the firing and dashed back, only to meet the Rangers at the end of the street and be swept down to a man.

Pandemonium reigned in the main street of Toral. A dozen houses were now aflame on both sides of the street. Women ran screaming from the blazing buildings, and a knot of men gathered in the street and beyond the fire, while the women clustered beyond them, and behind them from the Rangers. It wasn't strategy, but chance; yet, seeing the women beyond their target, the Rangers held their fire, while a hail of lead swept down the street which was now light as day. Two more Rangers fell from their horses, as they whirled and dashed back to the river end of the street. Burt and Connie were just riding into the street, when Old Captain Quill swung his great horse in front of them, and yelled:

"Get back, you damn' fool! I'll shoot you if you bring that girl in here!"

One glance at that seething furnace told Burt the story.

"Follow me!" he called, and dashed through the willows to a sort of alley back of the houses that fronted on the south side of the street. There were only fifteen of the eighteen Rangers left; but they were in a bunch when Burt pulled them up in the shadows a hundred feet south of where the knot of men stood, still firing down the street where they had last seen the Rangers. They stood out boldly in the light of the fire. Big Frank Fenley was urging the little band on. It was not so much bravery on his part, but sheer desperation. Suddenly a withering volley took his men in the flank. Fenley was among the first to fall. Nobody ever knew who killed him, but Burt Bell's carbine was spouting flame a second ahead of the others.

In a moment the main street of Toral was a shambles. The carbines empty, Old Captain Quill thundered into the mob on his great bay horse, his men at his heels and all their pistols flaming death. The remnant broke and fled. Then began the destruction of a city that matched Nebuchadrezzar's visit to Tyre. Nothing was spared. The torch went to everything that would burn. A Chinaman came running up the steps from the cellar beneath a burning house and with a wild squeal darted into the chaparral, his pigtail flying in the wind. He had come from an opium den. If others were there in a stupor from the drug, they met death by fire; for the house collapsed a moment later.

ALL opposition was gone. Not even a stray shot was fired. The Rangers, still fifteen in number, gathered in a deep shadow far out at the east end of the street, just opposite the old deserted dobe house where Happy Nell had lost her life, and watched the leaping flames finish their work. Day was breaking, and looking over his company Captain Quill saw the white face of Connie Dillon.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he growled. "Somebody said, 'God takes care of fools, children, and drunk men.' I'd like to add women to the list. She ain't got a scratch and she's been right plumb through the middle of hell!"

As they sat watching the destruction of the wicked city, Connie was looking across at the deserted dobe house. She knew the walls wouldn't burn, and was hoping they wouldn't fire the roof and interior. It had been her last haven in Toral, and was the place where Happy Nell had made the supreme sacrifice. Connie didn't know it, but Burt had already put in a plea for the old house and the captain had spared it, as the lone landmark of what a few hours before had been a town.

"Pay a bounty for Rangers, will they, damn 'em!" snarled Captain Quill, as he sat on his horse a little way from the men. "They got three, but I wonder who'll pay the bounty, and who'll they'll pay it to. Mighty funny there wasn't more men here. We didn't get many, after that first fight. Must be——"

A man staggered out of the weed grown yard of the old house, and fell in the street. Captain Cloud dismounted and went to him. He lay on the ground, his face ashen pale.

"Water, water! Give me water!" he moaned.

Taking the canteen from his saddle, the captain raised the wounded man's head, and set it to his lips. In spite of his wrath against Toral, Quill Cloud couldn't refuse a dying enemy a drink of water.

"Feel better now?" he asked, as the man lay back on the ground.

"Yes, but—I'm—going pretty soon."

"Where are all the men in Toral?"

"They're—they're out guarding the trails to the east and north. Fenley was expecting trouble from that way, but you fellows came in at the back."

"Did all the women get out of town?"

"Yes, and all the peons and rabble with them. I was with the mob, but gave out, and had to stop at the old house. You fellows didn't shoot me. It was Fenley, damn him! But I saw him get his. He shot me because I wouldn't take a gun and fight. I was one of his clerks. Gimme some more water, please."

The man drank deeply again, but as he lay back on the ground a spasm of pain wrenched him and the spark of life went out.

"Burt," said Captain Quill Cloud a few minutes later, "it's coming daylight and we got to get out of here. That fellow says there are more than a hundred men guarding the trails to the north and east. As soon as it gets good and light, and they begin to meet the rabble that ran out of here, they'll gang up and come storming back. We wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance with a gang like that, and we're about out of cartridges. We've broke up the nest, and now if we can get out nobody will ever know who did it. As you said, this is not fit to report. There'll be plenty to report before we get through rounding up this range."

"I think we can go back the way we came, sir, if we start before they learn just what happened."

"All right. You lead. I owe you a good deal, son. If it hadn't been for you, I'd have ridden right into Toral, same as I would into any other town, and they'd have killed all of us."

Going back to the river, they found the three dead Rangers and lashed them to their saddles. Then, taking the trail through the willows, they followed on down the river and entered the mouth of the gorge that led to their retreat.

Just below the rim rock, Captain Quill halted the company.

"Boys," he said, "a Ranger's life is a

hard one, and he's apt to be buried most anywhere. I didn't want to bury my men at Toral, but it's clean up here. We've got nothing to dig graves with, when we get to camp. Here's a place we can bury them without tools, and the wolves can never dig them up."

The bodies were placed and covered with blankets, and then with a little effort they pushed over a bank of stone and gravel that had wavered through centuries of erosion. Such was a Ranger's funeral, and a few minutes later sixteen riders wended their way across the mesa and disappeared into the sunken valley. Sixteen people knew the story of the destruction of Toral, the most frightful plague spot the border ever knew. Those sixteen, and no more, knew, or would ever know, how the lights of Toral were extinguished forever. Captain Quill Cloud was thoughtful as he rode into the hidden camp. His work had just begun.

CHAPTER V

RANGER BELL IS DISCHARGED

THE noonday sun fell on a lovely scene in the little valley. There seemed to have been no change since the day before. The Rangers had reached their camp at mid-afternoon. After breakfast Connie Dillon had gone at once to the tent. Now, a group of horses were grazing contentedly in the middle of the valley, while lying about under the trees, were fifteen Rangers on their blankets, sleeping, to all appearances, but little less soundly than the three who lay below the rim rock. It was the sleep of exhaustion after that terrible night.

It was mid-afternoon when Captain Quill awoke and sat up on his blanket. He looked about at the sleeping men, and the gray caterpillar wriggled, feebly. He took out his pipe, stuffed it with tobacco and put it in his mouth, but didn't light it. He had an unpleasant duty to perform. He was going to discharge Ranger Bell. It was unpleasant for many reasons, but there were two outstanding ones. The first was that he had discovered in Burt Bell a true Ranger. Cool of head, steady of nerve and brave and resourceful to the last degree. Cleaning up the country west of the Pecos was going to be the biggest job he had ever tackled, and he'd need real men. The other reason was that he didn't know how Bell was going to take that discharge. Three years west of the Pecos had made a wildman of the boy in many ways. But there was no choice in the matter. Bell had to go, for only one reason.

When Captain Quill had an unpleasant duty to perform, he didn't let it ride him. He performed it and got it off his chest. Twenty feet from him, Burt Bell lay sleeping and breathing lightly. Captain Cloud picked up a pebble and tossed it accurately, striking Burt's hand sharply. The young man woke and sat up suddenly. Captain Quill put his finger on his lips for silence, then rose and stole out of camp, beckoning Burt to follow. They walked far toward the head of the valley, and sat down in the shade of some little trees. Neither of them had spoken since leaving camp. Captain Quill lit his pipe and puffed noisily. At last he spoke.

"Burt, I ain't never asked you many questions about yourself, but I want to ask some now. What had Frank Fenley done to you?"

"He killed my father," replied Burt simply.

"I see. Ain't you mistaken about that?"

"No, sir."

"That man's name was Wells, Harvey Wells."

"I know it was, but he changed it to Frank Fenley when he came west of the Pecos."

"Sure of that?"

"Yes, sir. I knew him well when I was a boy at school in Waco. It was a year before I found him, out here, but I couldn't be mistaken."

"No, I reckon not. Was there anybody else in Toral that you was after, particularly?"

"No, sir. Fenley, or Wells, was the only enemy I ever had in my life."

"This gang of killers that we run out of Toral, or rather that were out when we got there, are going to be pretty bitter. Cleaning this country up is going to be a nasty job. I need all the good men I can get, but—I hate to do it, Bell, but I got to discharge you from the service."

"Discharge me!" And Burt's face flushed dark red. "For what reason?"

"There's just one reason," said Captain Quill, musingly, "and I wish I didn't know it, but I do."

"What is it? Maybe I can explain it."

"No, you can't explain it. It can't be explained. It's an act of God. When I was a youngster like you I joined the Rangers. My captain was a hard riding, hard fighting man about as old as I am now. The years passed on, and he grew too old and dropped out of the service. I lost sight of him for years and supposed he was dead. Then one day I got a letter from him asking me to come to see him. I went because he had been a father to me and had made a Ranger and a man of me when I was just a wild boy. I found him a white haired man in his eighties, bent and walking with a cane, but still clear in his mind and noble in his heart.

" 'Quill,' he said, 'I have just one relative on earth, if he is on earth. That's a grandson. I'm afraid he's gone to the wild bunch. I've got a big plantation here in the Brazos Bottoms, and I've got some money. I've willed it all to that boy, but it can't do him no good unless I can find him. I want you to find him for me.'

"Then he gave me the boy's name and description, but I never could locate him. One day he came to my tent, and I said as soon as I saw him, there's Old Captain Nate Bell's grandson. Burt, he's drawin' on to ninety now, and you got to go back, son. He was alive a few months ago."

"But that ain't a discharge," said Burt, his eyes shining.

"Yes, it is. I'll discharge you with all the honor a Ranger can have, if you'll go back and let Old Captain Nate Bell see you before he dies, and tell him you're going to perpetuate the name of Bell in the Brazos Bottoms and keep it clean as he has done. If you won't do that—I'll kick you out of the company, then arrest you for being west of the Pecos. If I don't, damn me!"

"You won't have to do that, captain. I'm going back."

"Fine!" And Captain Quill stood up and gripped his hand. "I don't blame you none for coming out here. It's the best evidence I got that you're Old Captain Nate's grandson. He'd follow an enemy to hell, and die for a friend any day. Throw that gun away and forget how to sling it. The country where you're goin' is civilized."

Captain Cloud turned and walked toward the camp. When he had gone a little way, he looked back. Burt had sat down again and rolled a smoke. He had seen something that the captain had missed. Connie had passed the other side of a thicket and gone on to the little pool where the sun perch were. She heard a step and looked up to see Burt looking down at her.

"I—I came to tell you I'm discharged from the company," he said.

"Discharged! Why——"

"Yes. I don't think I'd ever make much of a Ranger, anyway. I'd like to have a home."

"Home!" echoed Connie, and her chin quivered. "I'll never have a home. I have nothing but these tattered rags on my body, and they are a man's clothes. I have no one to go to. Not a friend on earth."

"Don't say that, Connie. I——"

"Forgive me! You have been a wonderful friend, but you can't be burdened with me."

"I want to be burdened with you, always. Can't you see, don't you know——"

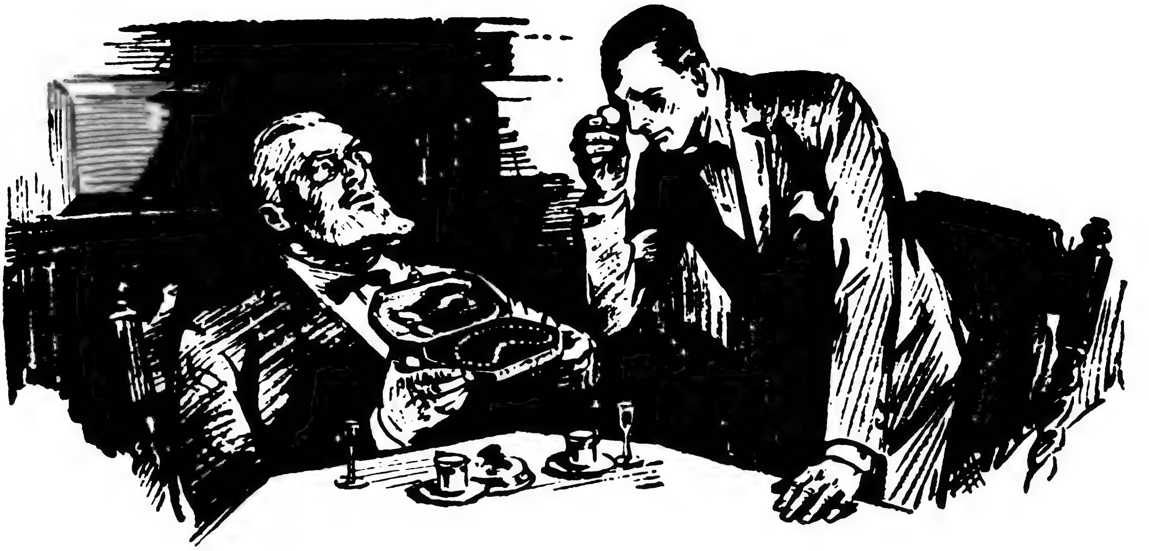
She looked into his eyes. Then he sat down and put his arm around her.

The little fish were neglected now, as Burt told her of the old two story house in the Brazos Bottoms, with honeysuckle at the door. Captain Quill saw them come into camp. He gave them one shrewd look, then went to meet them.

"God may not be west of the Pecos," he said, "but there are angels here. I can see them in Connie's eyes. Eat some supper now. Then you two better ride for Dunston. You can flag a train about midnight that'll take you to San Antone."

When they were ready to ride an hour later, he wrung their hands, and said:

"Good-by and God bless you. I hope to sit on that long gallery at the old Bell place with you some day, and maybe we'll talk again about the lights of Toral."



The Cleverest Crook on the Atlantic
and
The PEARL NECKLACE

By ROY TREVOR

WENTWORTH, James Arthur. Age 39. Height 5′7½″. Weight 170 lbs. Clean shaven; fresh complexion; hair dark brown, brushed straight back. Wears single eyeglass. Nationality British. Profession—Oh, well, to believe the passport quoted above, it stated "Mechanical engineer." But even Wentworth, James Arthur, would have found it difficult to fill up the space truthfully, and he was seldom at a loss for the right word.

He sat at ease in a small room at the back of an inconspicuous shop in Amsterdam, smoking his everlasting Virginia cigarets and sipping a glass of Bols. An empty cup that had contained black coffee stood on a table near by. Staurmartyne shut the heavy carved door gently and took the easy chair opposite. He was a man well over sixty, reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in Holland. He lowered his heavy body carefully into the wide expanse of chair, his full paunch and triple chins proclaiming a love of the good things of life. He wore a long imperial, originating somewhere amidst the creases under his broad under lip and, when excited, the stiletto of gray hair was apt to dance a devil's tattoo sticking out at every angle.

The Dutchman reached for his glass and raised it with cheerful friendliness.

"*Ach,* my dear Wentworth, have you decided, *ja?*"

The Englishman returned the gesture and finished his glass.

"Damned good," he said and raised a hand of protest against further hospitality. "Thanks no, Staurmartyne. I'm half inclined to accept your commission if the terms are worth the risk. There is another matter which I have under consideration, a consignment of silk for London. The remuneration looks good to me."

"Not so good, my friend, as what I can propose."

"Go ahead, old dear."

The fat man did not trouble to look around; his room was as private as human ingenuity could contrive. He pulled out a long red leather case of antique design from an inner pocket of his coat and, panting with the exertion, flicked back the top. With a grunt he slid the case gently across to the other.

Wentworth drew the case to him and broke into a little French melody he favored when interested beyond the point of trivial matters. The pearls were flawless. A treble string containing all of seven hundred specimens, perfectly matched in tint and size. And they had that indescribable glow between rose and cream so sought after, by pearl lover and expert alike.

He made no effort to handle them beyond running the tips of his fingers over the surface of the largest pearls. Then, with a sigh, he shut the case and laid it reverently on the table.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," was his sole comment.

"As always you hit the target, my good one. Two hundred and forty-five thousand for the pearls, alone, and add one hundred and ten thousand more for the historic value."

"Duty at eighty or twenty per cent?" came the question.

"At the full figure. We cannot, dare not touch it. The necklace is unique, as it is strung by laminated gold, unprocurable and impossible of imitation today. *Ach Gott!* The Chinese emerald clasp is part of the thread. *Nein!* It must reach Philadelphia intact."

Wentworth selected another cigaret thoughtfully and lit it, his eyes far away.

"It will cost your customer twenty per cent, Staurmartyne." His voice had a final ring in it that the other recognized.

"For that you guarantee that it will be delivered?"

Wentworth let his eyeglass drop into his left hand and polished it upon a silk handkerchief. He nodded and replaced it.

"And my commission?" the fat man asked.

"You blighted old Shylock. The usual ten per cent."

It was the Dutchman's turn to nod. Swiftly he calculated:

"Value, three hundred and fifty-five thousand. At twenty per cent, that's seventy-one thousand. Seven thousand one hundred for my commission leaves you nearly sixty-four thousand dollars. A big sum, James."

Wentworth laughed.

"That for a tale—a big risk if you like. Ten years in Sing Sing if I wasn't known. As it is, a life sentence for certain . . . Incidentally, the snifters (customs spies) know all about it I suppose? . . . By the way, whose is the lovely thing?"

"Na, na!" The other shook with mirth. "Even I have forgotten to whom it belongs now. I give you the name of a big man in Philadelphia who is to receive it. Oh, *ja*, your friends are outside. You are right to come to me openly. You could never escape notice again. They will not ever forget the Russian emeralds and the Raphael from the Sistine Chapel."

His imperial shot about at all angles. The memory of the two instances he had named had become classic in their way.

"How long do you give me?" asked Wentworth.

"Three months at the utmost."

"You will keep the string until I need it?"

"Ja. Oh, *Ja."* Then a moment later: "You will not take it now, *ach?"*

"That I cannot tell you," Wentworth replied. He bent over the table and opened the case, lifting out the three strings of pearls and holding them to his cheek for a moment. They glowed like live things. With another sigh he rearranged them tenderly in their nest of old black velvet.

The two men, so different in every way, looked at one another in silence. They had dealt together for many years and trusted one another implicitly. The Dutchman knew that Wentworth would guard his trust with his life, and the Englishman was satisfied that Staurmartyne's word was a bond unbreakable.

"I love the *guelden,* James, but I would not be you, old friend, for the pearls themselves."

"We always try to please," was the reply, and the Dutchman laughed.

FIFTEEN minutes later, Wentworth entered his suite of rooms at the hotel, to find a visitor awaiting him. George E. Caise greeted the Englishman with a sad handshake. He was barely forty-five and looked older by another fifteen years; a little, spare man with a wrinkled face devoid of all color. It was difficult to realize that here was one of the cleverest detectives employed by the United States Bureau of Customs.

"Morning, Teddy," responded Wentwort heartily. "What will you have?"

"Nix, Arthur. Nix for the baby, unless you happen to have any of those smokes that you and Morgan favor."

His host grinned like a boy and brought out a flat box of magnificent Havanas. Caise selected one with care and lit it with respect. Then he leaned back in his chair.

"You'll miss these in Sing Sing, Arthur."

"So will you, if I ever get there."

This brought a laugh, but the atmosphere was still tense with friendly caution.

"Going to take over the old Buddha's necklace, eh?" said the detective, after a few luxurious puffs.

"Never heard of it, Teddy, old dear."

"Listen, son," the detective said, pointing accusingly with his cigar, "the Bureau owes James Arthur Wentworth, mechanical engineer, quite a packet. Me, I'm clear to date. Every time the little Englishman sails, I cable what he's parking. Three times I've convoyed you on board ship with the goods. Get me—with the goods. So I'm O. K. Do they find the said goods when the little Englishman lands? Do they ever lamp the goods after he's landed? No, sir!"

The American paused, but the other continued to smoke in silence.

Then he sighed and continued:

"You're a hard case, Arthur, a darned hard case; but remember the pitcher and give the well a miss this time. I'd hate to lose dropping in on you for one of these cigars and that's what is going to happen next time."

Again a silence and then Wentworth said lightly:

"And I'd hate to miss your cheery face, old man."

He said this with real feeling, for he liked and respected the other. The detective was one of those rare individuals who set duty first and yet could play the game. The two were experts in their own lines and, when they met together on the top of the fence, it was always with a feeling of mutual liking.

"Old Man Staurmartyne had better hand over the Buddha trophy to a museum for all the chance he's got to pass it over, Arthur. We've got him tabulated. It's in the big safe in his office, and if he tries to move it we move with it, see? And while we are on the subject, get this straight: now that you have been with the Dutchman, you and me are booked as traveling companions from now on."

Wentworth gave him a sunny smile.

"Good for you, Teddy. And when do we start?"

"That's up to you, boy," was the reply.

Wentworth extracted an envelope from his breast pocket, opened it and showed a long strip of printed paper, a reservation of Suite Number Four in the *Deutschland*, the crack ship of the Hamburg-America Line.

"Leaving at five p. m., Teddy. You had better look slippy."

For reply the American extracted a voluminous pocket book and laid on the table an exact duplicate. They both laughed, and the Englishman said:

"Three hours to pack. Better get out and let me have a go at the boxes."

The other rose at once but looked back as he reached the doorway.

"Drop it, Arthur," he said quietly.

"See you on board, laddie."

"You darned fool!"

And the door shut with a bang.

THEY dined at the same table, took their walks together round the promenade deck, played bridge, generally as partners and, so far as any observant passenger might have noted, were the best of friends.

Wentworth had paid another call on the Dutchman on the way down to the boat and Caise waited for him in the taxi. Beyond this, the latter did not know how matters stood.

The third morning out, the detective missed his companion. They had breakfasted together as usual but at eleven o'clock Caise found himself alone. He hunted around the ship and, about the time that the first lunch gong sounded, located his quarry in the chief engineer's cabin. They were drinking highballs and, as the chief explained, were friends after a fashion. It seemed that he had put in the last two years of the War in the German Submarine Service, while Wentworth had been a torpedo man in the British Navy. Caise was welcomed heartily and found himself listening to reminiscences, the majority of which needed careful editing for a post-war world.

"Ach Gott! You speak well, Mister Wentworth," the chief chuckled as the Englishman finished a story. "Do you not remember the Captain of the *unterseeboot* who occasionally visited the vaudeville at Edinburgh on a Saturday night and would post the program, on which he had signed his name, to your commander in chief before embarking?"

Wentworth nodded. For the German was referring to an actual fact that had made the joker in question a much sought after gentleman in every ward room of the Grand Fleet.

Caise joined the German in the laughter that followed and presently he and Wentworth sought a belated lunch.

"Say, where have you been all morning, Arthur?" he asked, as they finished the soup.

"Dunno, old lad. Wandering round generally. Was up on the bridge first with Number One. Then went down in the engine room and finished in the chief's cabin. Why?"

"Only wanted to know."

"Well—anything wrong with that for an alibi?"

Caise nodded. But afterwards he sought out the chief officer and the second engineer; both remembered Wentworth about the times he had stated and the matter dropped.

THE night before the ship was due in New York the detective made a further appeal to his friend. The latter listened to all he had to say. He was dressing for dinner at the time, although it was the last night aboard, and, when he had adjusted his black tie to his satisfaction, replied:

"I've told you, my dear old sleuth, that I don't know a damned thing about what you keep on trying to ram down my throat. Of course I've nothing to declare and naturally intend to say so. What do you want me to do? Manufacture a Buddha necklace just to please your pals, or what?"

"Listen, Arthur: The Bureau knows you have it; but whether you have or not won't alter what's coming to you—so far as the search is concerned. If you have got it, say so, pay up and look pleasant. My duty is to prevent Uncle Sam from being swindled and, so long as that's understood, I've no reason on God's earth to see you get in Dutch. If you do try to slip one over on us, then the Lord have mercy on you! Get me: You sign a sworn declaration that you have nothing to declare and you and me don't speak again, except officially."

Wentworth straightened his dinner jacket collar carefully.

"Then it's *au revoir* until we meet again outside the twelve mile limit, eh?"

"Sure is, if you ever get that far."

"Then let's have a cocktail together, laddie, while we're pally. After dinner I am handing in my declaration form to the purser."

"What have you said?" The detective stretched out his hand for the paper the other lifted off the washstand and read—

One dozen golf balls	Value $	7:50
One packet aneroid barometer	"	21:00
One imitation pearl necklace	"	100:00
One old red leather case for above.	"	500:00
One wreath of Flanders poppies in block of ice	"	35:00
Total		$663:50

The American regarded the last item and coughed.

"Say, what in the hell do you want a wreath for?"

"To lay on the grave of the Unknown Warrior at Washington," was the reply in all seriousness.

"You'll need it yourself. Anyhow, not one of these things will go through."

"Probably not and that's why I put on the values. If they're destroyed, the customs will owe me six hundred and sixty odd dollars."

"And you think you'll be there to collect it, I suppose."

"If I don't, the British ambassador at Washington is going to earn part of his salary."

Caise looked across the cabin.

"Go to it, boy," he said seriously. "You deserve to win for your darned nerve. How about that cocktail you talked about?"

THE day was a glorious one as the *Deutschland* came to an anchorage off the Island to await the tide. Shortly after she took position, a Customs' launch came alongside and Caise whistled thoughtfully when the five men it contained climbed the ladder to the open hatch. There was Burrows, representing the Bureau in person; Johns, Bradshaw and O'Neil, three detectives, each with a long record of successful service. The fifth man was Holt, an assessor.

Wentworth was sitting at ease in the smoke room, when his steward brought him a polite message to attend in No. 4 stateroom. The place looked overcrowded as he pushed open the door. Burrows was talking earnestly with Caise and in the background three biggish men were taking off their jackets and turning up their sleeves.

“Mister James Arthur Wentworth?” asked Burrows heavily. The mechanical engineer bowed.

“This your paper of sworn declaration? Say, don't be in any hurry to admit it. We haven't any jurisdiction until you do. Think it over.” He paused, but Wentworth answered at once.

“Certainly it's mine, Mister Burrows.”

“Know me, do you?”

“I know your reputation, Mister Burrows, though I believe you don't often honor a ship's arrival. You live mostly in Washington, I believe; probably the reason we have not met before, in person.”

“That's all from you. Nothing to declare, you say?”

“Well,” began Wentworth with a deliberate drawl, “there's a dozen golf balls and a wreath I'm rather proud of——”

“Let's see the darned things you put down.”

Wentworth drew out a heavy red leather case of antique design from his breast pocket and the men present stiffened perceptibly. Inside on the black velvet lay a long string of rosy beads. Holt gave them a quick look, took them up in his hands.

“Imitation. Good quality. Value about right,” he reported and laid them back again.

“Give him a receipt,” Burrows ordered and Holt wrote out an official form.

“Same for the case.”

“It's worth five hundred dollars,” advised Wentworth in a noncommittal tone.

“Now the rest of the junk.”

The box of golf balls was examined and the balls bounced, then taken, upon receipt, for X-ray examination.

The aneroid was also confiscated temporarily and they arrived at the item “Wreath in ice block.”

As this was in the ship's storage it was left until later, Johns being sent to lay an embargo upon its removal.

“And now, Mister Arthur James Wentworth, mechanical engineer, is that all you've got to declare?”

“Yes. That's the lot.”

“Baggage?”

“All here.” Wentworth replied, pointing to a couple of steamer trunks and some dispatch cases.

“Anything in the hold?”

“Nothing.”

“Strip.” The order came like a pistol crack.

“I beg your pardon, but——”

His protest was cut short.

“Strip or we'll do it for you. Understand?”

Wentworth shrugged his shoulders. He took off his coat, waistcoat and pants and sat while the three men went through them. Every inch of cloth was subjected to an exhaustive examination and even pressed out so flat that a pinhead would have stood up like the Statue of Liberty.

“Get out of the rest.”

Shirt, collar, tie, boots, socks and silk undershirt came off, and presently Wentworth stood in his pristine glory.

Again a meticulous search.

“Now your turn. Lie down flat on the floor.”

A bad ten minutes followed, but the results were negative, so far as the search was concerned. He dressed slowly, the center of six pairs of gimlet eyes, standing upon a news sheet and putting on each garment as it was handed to him. Then, with a click, his arms were fastened together behind his back.

“And that fixes you,” he was told.

“Steady on, Mister Burrows. Is this an arrest?” he asked.

“Yep—if you like,” came the uncompromising reply. “You are arrested on grave suspicion. You go right now to the Island. We'll see to your baggage and cabin. You'll be searched when you land, and if we've fallen down, I guess the Ellis bunch will handle you.”

It was a difficult descent into the Customs' launch, but Wentworth made it, assisted by Johns and Bradshaw. Then the latter pair climbed back on board and the launch set out for Ellis Island. Wentworth was evidently expected. A couple of hard faced men conducted him from the landing place through a number of long corridors and into a small bedroom furnished in Spartan fashion. Again the search was renewed and, after undergoing a similar examination, his clothes were removed and a coarse set of heavy flannels given him.

An hour later they brought up lunch—a bowl of good soup, bread and butter, beans and coffee. They had not replaced the handcuffs and he was grateful when he found the contents of his cigaret case on the tray and a box of matches.

ABOUT five o'clock, as nearly as he could judge by the sun, Burrows and Caise arrived. Both were hot and disappointed men. Evidently things had not gone as expected.

"Come across, boy," growled Burrows, striding into the room, while Caise closed the door and locked it again.

"Perhaps you'll tell me just what you are looking for?" Wentworth asked politely, and for a second thought that the Customs man would have hit him when he said it.

The big man pulled himself together with an effort.

"Listen, you. I'm gonna tell you straight that we're looking for a necklace of seven hundred of the finest matched pearls in the world. And you are going to tell us where it is." This last in ominous accents.

"Oh! You mean the one old Staurmartyne showed me the day I sailed. Why didn't you say so before?"

"I've said it now. Where is it?"

"If it wouldn't sound like a feeble pun," replied Wentworth, with a wry smile, "I should reply 'Search me!' However, so far as I know, the necklace is still in Amsterdam."

Caise interrupted an outburst on the part of the chief.

"See here, Arthur, Staurmartyne hasn't the necklace now. We had a cablegram from our people. Does that help?"

"Not a bit, old lad. I haven't got the thing. Do you think I'm damned fool enough to risk a lifer, knowing what was bound to be waiting for me here?"

"Listen, Wentworth!" Burrows spoke with considerable restraint and his voice was icy. "You stop here two weeks. Get me—two weeks. And they won't be happy ones. When you do land—if you do—you'll be trailed night and day, and if we as much as smell a pearl about you . . ." He didn't finish; but the omission was significant.

Caise came in there.

"You've got the original box the Buddha pearls were in."

"Of course I have. Staurmartyne never misses a chance to make money. He sold it to me. I've declared its value at five hundred dollars . . . By the way, it's an antique and free from duty."

"Now see here—" began Burrows, who was at the end of his patience. He elbowed Caise to one side.

"And you listen to me, Mister Burrows," interrupted Wentworth. "There's a firm of first class lawyers of international fame in New York looking after me. If I don't land tonight, they will apply for a writ of habeas corpus and it will be backed by men whose names count quite a lot."

Burrows and Caise exchanged a look of astonishment and then uneasiness. This was an unpleasant jolt; holding a man secretly was one thing, but who could have foreseen such a superb piece of nerve as obtaining a court order through a reputable law firm.

"The British ambassador—" began Caise and stopped as Wentworth laughed.

"Don't worry about the British ambassador. Give me a firm of business men with a retaining fee of five thousand dollars to beat all the ambassadors in the world for action. This is the land of service, and I expect to get it when I pay."

At that moment a knock came on the door and, after it had been opened, a thickset man appeared.

"No use, chief," he reported. "We examined the golf balls and even unwound them. We went the whole way with the beads—cut them in half and powdered the lot. The aneroid has been pulverized and the ice block has run down the drains. Nix, sir, nix!"

"And that will cost just six hundred and sixty-three dollars." Wentworth smiled, and added: "My beloved legal advisers will get it, too, and a bit over for personal inconvenience."

There was silence for a moment. Burrows jerked his arm at the man who had reported and they went out, leaving Caise and the prisoner together.

"Sorry, Arthur, but you haven't a kick coming," Caise began.

"Of course not, Teddy, old boy. No ill feelings at all. But seriously, you had better tell them not to play it too hard. What I said about the lawyers is truth. If you can't find anything before the courts open in the morning, you had best let me telephone and stop legal action. I'm serious!"

Caise looked at him with frank admiration.

"Doggone it, boy, I half believe you. Anyway, I'll tell the chief what you say. If you do get out, what are your plans? It might help some."

Wentworth thought for a moment.

"I'm through with America this trip. I'll tell you what, Teddy. The *Deutschland* sails the day after tomorrow. Get me a good reservation and I'll go back on her. Also, if it eases the situation, I'll agree to stay with you until she sails, but on condition I get out of here in the morning.

"Oh, yes! In case I forget, I shall need a check for the goods destroyed and a thousand dollars, in addition. Don't interrupt," Wentworth said, as Caise started to speak. "If I don't get the thousand dollars, I shall stay on and bring suit for twenty-four thousand, for wrongful arrest and defamation of character."

BEHOLD the crack liner of the Hamburg-America Line taking aboard first class passengers preparatory to leaving New York. Wentworth, James Arthur, mechanical engineer, and George Edward Caise, detective, are strolling about the deck reserved for distinguished guests.

"How long until we pass the twelve mile limit, Teddy?"

"About three hours and the bar opens." Caise was watching his charge with the same catlike care he had exercised throughout the week end, during which period Wentworth had been his guest at the detective's home in the Bronx.

"Wish they would hurry," was the answer, and just then came the welcome order to inboard gangways.

STAURMARTYNE regarded his visitor almost with awe. Wentworth stretched out his legs under the table and grinned.

"Did you get a cablegram?"

"Two days after you arrived in New York."

"Everything okay?"

For answer the Dutchman silently handed him a check. It was in sterling for £13,000.

"Pay it into my account at the Crédit Lyonnaise, Paris." Wentworth passed back the paper carelessly. "My word, I can feel those damned flannel clothes now. Did you ever go down a wire ladder in handcuffs, Staurmartyne?"

The old Dutchman looked at him in obvious admiration.

"But, my boy, my dear Arthur, how did you accomplish the miracle?"

"Does a conjuror destroy his illusions? Next time you have a job of work, remember me. We give *service*."

"*Mein Gott!*" the fat man breathed it like a prayer. "I will."

Wentworth reached for his hat.

"We always strive to please," he said and went out.

A COSY little flat in St. John's Wood, London, England. Truly a scene of domestic bliss. Wentworth, James Arthur, mechanical engineer, seated at his own dinner table toying with a Napoleon brandy, while Jasmine, his wife, prepares the coffee with her own fair hands.

"God, but it's good to be home!" he was saying and meant it.

"Never again, Jim, never again."

"Nonsense, old girl. How about the Russian emeralds? Who took the risk then?"

"That was different, darling."

"Well, how about the sable coat you chose this afternoon?"

"Jim, I'd rather wear rabbit, and you know it."

"Well, well! A miss is as good as a mile. It's over now, and though I say it who shouldn't, it was as neat a bit of work as possible—bless the chief engineer of the *Deutschland!*"

"Amen, to that," she replied, setting before him a cup of true egg shell china. "I'm just aching to hear. Oh, Jim! It's been a miserable time, sweetheart."

"Everything went like clockwork. I wore the damned thing round my neck for three days and nearly fainted every time Caise laid his hand on my shoulder. By the way, he is a sportsman. Wouldn't have hesitated a second in his duty; watched me all the way back like an elder brother . . . Oh, yes. The pearls! I was worried stiff and then, as usual, I had a brain wave. The address in Philadelphia was that of a man clearly above suspicion. A big pot in his way and safe as a house. The last man you would think of. Mad on antiques, I suppose, and he's sure got a wonder in the Buddha necklace." He sipped the coffee and bowed to his wife. "Perfect. None like it in the world . . . To go back—where was I? Oh yes. On the blasted boat, trapped like a fox and the hounds baying on the other side.

"The second night out we had caviar for dinner—real pre-War, Russian caviar. The ship had a consignment direct from Riga, about the first since the War. Fifty dollars a tin, sealed, holding three pounds. Everyone was buying them to send to friends. I got six tins off the chief steward; had one open in my room for a morning biscuit and addressed the others to five people in the States. The steward fixed the dispatch . . . By the way, I gave him the thousand dollars I got off the Custom on the way back . . . He put them through the ship's post office and guaranteed the contents . . . Name of sender? Yes. I got that from the passenger list. A woman in Boston; real New England stock, irreproachable family. Couldn't be a suspicion . . . Thanks to the chief, I had the use of a small soldering iron and the rest was easy."

Jasmine's arms were around his neck.

"You wonderful old darling. And then?"

"Oh, then, I had written an ordinary ship's post card to Philadelphia to say that a tin of caviar was on its way and would he notify his friend in Amsterdam if he liked the contents."

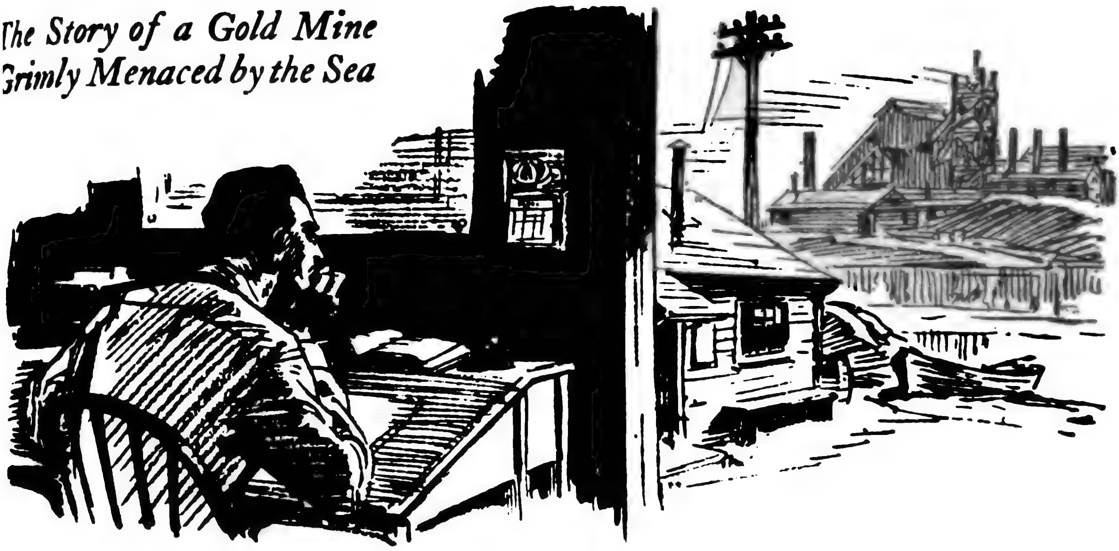
"Who did you send the other tins to?"

Wentworth kissed her and chuckled.

"One to Henry Ford; one to the Mayor of New York; one to the Warden of Sing Sing Prison; and the fourth . . . Oh, yes. It was to be posted, the day we sailed, to Mister Burrows! By jove, I hope they enjoyed 'em!"

In the next issue there will be another fine story of those gentlemen of quick wits and easy daring who live in the shadow of the Law—"The Man for the Job", by Clements Ripley.

The Story of a Gold Mine
Grimly Menaced by the Sea



The SECRET *of the* GOLDEN ISLE

By EARL BENHAM CRANE

THE fact that the vein of the Tyee Gold Mine extended down across the rocky shore and out under the salt water of Chinook Inlet did not worry Stuart Waring, the manager of the mine. The workings of the mine were out under the sea, but there was sufficient solid rock between them and the floor of the inlet to withstand the pressure, great as it was. In fact the working conditions and quantity and quality of the Tyee ore had appeared so advantageous to young Waring that during his four year tenure as manager he had not only taken most of his salary in stock in the Tyee Company but he had persuaded many of his friends to invest their savings in it.

He was worried, however, by the fact that for some time the directors of the company had been concerned about the proximity of the Tyee workings to the side line of the Golden Isle Mine, a property which had been engulfed by the sea thirty years before. The possibility of breaking into those old workings and drowning the miners disturbed the directors. But Waring had made a careful study of the geological conditions and he was convinced that the dip of the Golden Isle vein had carried their workings far away from the mutual side line.

The broad window in the end of the Tyee office afforded a clear view, a few hundred yards out in Chinook Inlet, of the tiny island which bore the dilapidated buildings of the once famous Golden Isle Mine. The sight of the old wreckage depressed Waring. The skeleton of the gallows frame hung over the shaft, its steel ribs exposed and brown with rust, and the few dejected looking houses which still stood were swaybacked and grayed by the salt winds. Waring fancied that the wind would wail dolefully through that old bone yard.

Little was known of the details of the disaster which had wiped out the Golden Isle Mine thirty years before. It was evident that all of the mining had been done under the sea, for the island was barely large enough to afford room for the shaft site, the mill and the camp buildings. The few survivors of the catastrophe had long ago disappeared, leaving behind them not even enough information upon which to form the most vague idea of the location of the underground workings. And the others—those who did not survive—well, they were still down in the mine. A long shift.

WARING was sitting at his desk in the Tyee office, looking out of the broad window at the bleak little island and visualizing his miners at work out there under the sea, when he heard a peremptory knock at the door.

"Come in," he bade. The door swung open and there stood, before his astonished eyes, a stranger; an elderly little man with sharp features and pale gray eyes; a little man who wore his rakish, threadbare clothing with something of an air.

"Ah—good day, Mister Waring," said this odd person in a surprising bass as he removed his hat with grace. "I am delighted to observe that I have arrived in time." He strutted in like a cocky sparrow and seated himself in a chair near Waring's desk.

"That's nice," said Waring, with a grin. "In time for what?" There was something about this entrance which compelled his expectant attention.

"Ahead of the Grim Reaper," replied the stranger, and he smiled amusedly at Waring's expression. "Patience, Mister Waring," he said soothingly. "I'll state my business after I have rested a bit. I don't climb as well as I once did," he added regretfully as he passed his hand, a well shaped, scholarly hand, over his white head.

"Sure," said Waring. "Rest, and then I'll be glad to hear your business."

The stranger gave him a glance of approval.

"Kindly spoken, for a young man with the features more of a high class light heavyweight than an engineer," he said. "No great stigma these days, I take it," he chuckled, and added: "But an admirable combination—instincts of an engineer and face of a fighter." Evidently Waring's expression did not encourage further personalities, for the man changed his tone and announced simply:

"My name is Guest—Andrew Guest." Then he sat erect and slowly raised a thin arm until it pointed out of the window and toward the little island in Chinook Inlet. "I was the engineer of the Golden Isle Mine," he said impressively. Waring started. "Yes. That tragedy is on my head," the old man admitted, in a hollow bass. He drew a deep breath and the thin arm fell to his side limply.

"You have a nice, profitable operation here in the Tyee, Mister Waring," the visitor changed the subject, with an air of relief. "A nice, profitable operation, and I notice that the price of Tyee Company shares remains high. A comfortable condition, surely." Then he bowed his white head and said in a low tone, as though speaking to himself: "It was so with the Golden Isle."

For an instant Waring got the impression that this was play acting and that he was being hoaxed, and he said, rather testily:

"You say that your name is Andrew Guest and that you were the engineer of the Golden Isle Mine. Why should I believe you?"

The stranger gracefully took up a pencil from Waring's desk, knelt and made a small dot with it on the office floor.

"That I am an engineer, you will now concede." And as he spoke the little man lifted a transit from the corner of the room, spread the tripod over the dot on the floor and pulled down the plumb bob which hung between its legs. And so rapidly did the white, thin fingers flit as they turned the leveling screws that almost before he had finished the sentence the instrument was set up and leveled.

"And that I am Andrew Guest, once engineer of the Golden Isle, you must admit," continued the little man, drawing a leather-bound book from his pocket and laying it on Waring's desk. "My field notes," he announced. With the pencil he rapidly wrote a line on a pad which lay on the desk before Waring. The stained and yellowed pages of the book creaked as Waring turned them. This was genuine, without a doubt. Age could not be counterfeited. The musty smell alone would vouch for thirty years.

On the fly leaf of the book was written in an eccentric hand:

Survey Notes of the Golden Isle Mine.
Andrew Guest, Surveyor.

Waring glanced at the words which the stranger had written on the pad which lay before him:

Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist thy image.

The writing was identical with the dim characters in the notebook. It seemed to Waring that the identification was complete. As he continued to turn the pages of the notebook, the sepulchral voice of the stranger went on:

"Yes, a nice, comfortable, profitable operation. And on the other beam of the scales of Justice—the lives of brother men. How many? Fifty, a hundred? It does not matter." He turned his pale gray eyes from the window to Waring's face. "The responsibility is yours, young man; as it was mine at the Golden Isle." And then he turned to the window again as though unable to keep his gaze from the dreary island.

Waring was of a mind to end the conversation; to tear away the pall of uneasiness which was spreading over him; to stand up, smile genially, extend his hand and say, "Come again, Mister Guest." But he did not do it. He sat staring at the dash of yellow stain in the man's white hair.

Then the visitor turned to him, and, with what Waring took to be mock concern, asked if he were boring him.

"I hope not, Mister Waring," he went on without waiting for an answer, "for I have come a long way to talk with you. For I want, if possible, to aid in avoiding another disaster such as we had at the Golden Isle thirty years ago."

He arose and walked to the window overlooking the inlet and its bleak island. He did not strut this time as he crossed the room. There was a gloomy droop to his thin shoulders and his feet trailed tragically.

"Ah! The faces of their women, as they came and stared into that hole, brim full of water," he intoned.

Then he turned to his hearer suddenly, and his thin features appeared drawn with pain.

"Mister Waring, you are about to suffer the pangs of conscience which I knew, for paying in lives the score of faulty engineering. You are about to break into the Golden Isle workings."

"How do you know that?" asked Waring sharply, a deep color mounting to his high cheek bones.

"I've had access to your engineering office the last two nights and have studied the maps of the Tyee workings," replied the old man, with a wry smile. "Rather unethical," he admitted, "but the only way."

"But you can't remember the location of the Isle workings well enough to warrant your assertion," Waring persisted.

"No need." Guest paused for a moment and then added: "For I have the working map of the Golden Isle Mine."

"The map?" exclaimed Waring in pleased surprise.

"Yes, sir. It shows every foot of workings in the Golden Isle Mine, and it will enable you to avoid the dangerous territory and continue to mine your ore. You may have it for fifty thousand dollars."

Waring's emotions were mixed. He was tremendously anxious to see the map but he was just as determined not to be the victim of extortion. Was the germ of doubt, which Guest had set gnawing at the supports of his conviction that the mine was safe, the result of good salesmanship on the old man's part? Or was he telling the truth about the proximity of the flooded workings?

"Where is this map now?" he asked.

"In a safety deposit vault in a city, two days journey from here," Guest replied.

"How long have you had it?"

"Since the day of the disaster. I took it with me when I left."

Then, with a gesture of finality, Waring said:

"No, Mister Guest. I'll stand by my convictions. I'll not recommend that we buy your map." The old man's gaze was brimming with accusation.

"The fighter in you speaking now, my boy," he said, coolly. "Better let the engineer prevail in this. Criminal negligence is a serious thing. I cannot soon forget the penalty which was imposed upon the management when the Golden Isle was engulfed and all those men perished." He arose and took up his hat, adding, as he stalked to the door, "I feel it my duty to take my offer to the board of directors of your company. In a way, with the information I have, I feel responsible for the lives of your men."

When his visitor had departed, Waring sat at his desk trying to foretell the outcome of this new development. Undoubtedly Guest would place his offer before the Tyee board of directors. He wondered what would be the reactions of Pember, the president of the Tyee Company; a man whose deeds were always motivated by greed. Although Pember was not one of the largest stockholders, he was a forceful man and he took an active interest in the affairs of the company. Naturally, he was a member of the board of directors, and Waring imagined that he would exert considerable influence over that body.

For the first time, Waring was worried about his investment in the Tyee Company, and about the investments of his friends whom he had advised to buy Tyee stock. It had been but a short time before, when, in a burst of enthusiasm over the prospects of the mine and a boyish desire to make money for some old friends who had never known prosperity, he had written them advising the purchase of Tyee stock. And they had responded with more alacrity than would be expected of people for whom their meager savings were the only buffer between them and want. In fact, they had plunged. Especially did this apply to old Professor Atwood, who had taught Waring chemistry at mining school; and to Carrie Holloway, who conducted a gift shop in Waring's home town and who was a cousin of his mother.

Waring put on his oilskin coat, took his carbide lamp and went down in the mine. There was something bearing on his conscience which could only be stilled by his being in the mine with the men. He watched the busy trammers as they pushed their cars back and forth on their endless trips from ore chute to skip pocket. And he stood beside machine drillers as they cranked their roaring drills.

Occasionally, when in this part of the mine, Waring amused himself with the thought that he was down under the sea. It was an unusual situation and he enjoyed conjuring with it. He thought now that if he could but see through the roof of rock above him he might gaze on the bottoms of the occasional ships which passed through the channel and over his head. The stokers on those boats would not realize, as they slid through Chinook Inlet, that eight hundred feet straight below them were fellow men bending to shovels as vigorously as they, and sweating as profusely as they were sweating.

AFTER Guest's visit, Waring spent as much time as possible in the mine. He stayed underground until hunger or the need of sleep drove him out for a short time. No one could say that Waring would ask men to work where he was afraid to stay. This went on, day after day and night after night, until Pember arrived at the mine, unexpectedly.

Pember was anxious for an interview and Waring joined him in the office. The president of the Tyee Company was a dark man, ponderous of movement; and he had an aggressive mouth and small, greedy eyes.

"Waring," began Pember, in an undertone, as he looked around the office cautiously, "the responsibility for the lives of these eighty-odd miners is more than I can stand." His hands fluttered from fumbling with his watch chain to polishing the arms of his chair. "I can't sleep at night," he continued. "A picture of our workings breaking into those old flooded workings of the Golden Isle Mine, and our men being drowned like moles in a hole is always before me."

"That responsibility belongs on my shoulders, and I'd be glad if you'd allow me to carry it," suggested Waring impatiently.

"Carry it. Carry, and welcome," snapped Pember. "But just the same, about all that is remembered of the Golden Isle disaster is that when the sea broke into their workings and caught those miners the management got hell for it."

While Pember sketched dramatic word pictures of the terrible consequences of breaking into the Isle workings, Waring looked out of the office window on the gray water of the inlet. His gaze slowly crossed the channel and rested on the little island. A thin, white mist hung over the inlet and it had the effect of magnifying the row of white gulls which dotted the swayed roof of the old mill building. A changing breeze ruffled the channel to a dirty green and then back to gray again.

Evidently Pember noticed that Waring's attention was wandering, for he reached over and touched him on the arm.

"Waring," he said solemnly, "in following our ore down near the side line of the Golden Isle property we are tempting fate too far." He straightened up in his chair and puffed out his heavy lips. "God, man, think of the risk!" he said thickly after an effective pause. "I'm sick of the strain. I'm in favor of calling it well done and closing down."

Closing down! Waring could not believe that Pember would be in favor of closing down anything which was yielding him gain, the lives of men notwithstanding. Pember had not mentioned Guest and his map in his argument. Waring wondered about this. Guest must have been to the directors with his story and his proposal to sell them the map, for Pember seemed to be almost in a panic.

The president's restless hands rearranged several articles on his desk and then he swung around ponderously in his swivel-chair and faced the manager, saying impressively:

"Waring, I think that you should write to the board of directors that, owing to the fact that our ore has led us down near the flooded workings of the Golden Isle you consider the Tyee too dangerous to work and you recommend that it be closed down."

"Closed down?" echoed Waring. "But I don't recommend that it be closed down," he stated positively. "Although we're working near Golden Isle ground, there is geological evidence that the dip of their vein carried their workings away from us. As long as I'm of that belief I'll not be a party to closing down. I'm not asking the men in the mine to take any more chances than I'd take myself."

Pember raised his shoulders and turned up the palms of his hands.

"That's it," he said heatedly. "That's it. Everyone knows that you'd take a mighty long chance yourself."

Waring pursed his full lips a moment as he considered this last statement. He wondered if there were any possibility that he had allowed his natural inclination to carry on and his anxiety to protect the investments of his friends to outweigh sound engineering judgment.

"I'm responsible to the board of directors, of which you are one, for the continued profitable operation of the mine," he said to Pember. "In the absence of something more definite than mere conjecture that we're dangerously near those old workings, I'll continue to operate." He glanced out of the window toward the Golden Isle and then added, "I'll admit, however, that I'd be mighty glad to know just where those old workings are."

WHEN Waring was making his rounds of the mine that day he met Boone, the mine foreman, on the eighth level; and Boone told him that the mine was making an unusually large amount of water. He said that for the past twelve hours they had been pumping two hundred gallons a minute more than normally. Ordinarily this condition would have taken its place among the obstacles met daily in deep mining. But it worried Waring, coming as it did on the heels of the disturbing scene with Pember and in view of what Guest had had to say.

What if Pember's contention were sound? What if Guest had told the truth? Was he justified in allowing these men to continue to work in this hole, willing as they were to stake their lives on his engineering judgment? Was this wall of rock ahead of them a mere shell, momentarily in danger of crushing from the weight of the sea bearing down into the Isle workings, or was he right in his conclusion that the dip of the Isle vein had carried their workings far away from the Tyee? He asked himself these questions, but could find no comforting answer.

In that part of the mine which had progressed farthest toward the Golden Isle property, Waring approached a miner at his work. The exhaust of the heaving air drill was blowing the miner's light in such a manner that he did not see the reflection of Waring's light, and he started violently when he became aware of Waring's presence.

"Startled you, did I, Manley?" asked Waring, as the miner silenced the drill.

"Well, yes—a little," admitted the miner. "It gets kinda lonesome in here. And sometimes I hear sounds." Waring noticed the wide drawn lids of the man's eyes.

"You're too old a miner to worry about tommyknockers, Manley."

"Yes. But you see—there's something personal about this, Mister Waring. How far do you reckon it is over to the Golden Isle workings?"

"Nobody knows. A long way, I think."

"Sometimes I think it's right close, Mister Waring. Especially before I get the drill a-runnin', and it's so quiet." He smiled apologetically. "You see—my—my father's down there in the bottom level of the Isle workings."

"Your father, Manley? Too bad."

"Yes. So sometimes, when I been alone in here for a long time and it's so damn quiet, and I hear *tap-tap-tap-tap*, and knowing it's just ordinary mine noises like I've heard in plenty mines—sometimes I get nervous and think maybe he's got a hammer in there and he's tapping on the wall to warn me back." There was a moment of silence. The miner's face colored slowly under the splashes of mud, and the flame on his cap lamp chattered and wheezed.

"I'll have Boone change you to another part of the mine," said Waring, sympathetically.

"Oh, that's all right, Mister Waring. If you say it's all right, I'll stick. Lot of fool notions—that's all." He turned on the air and the drill resumed its roar.

During the remainder of Pember's stay at the mine, Waring was constantly harassed by his expressions of fear for the safety of the miners. Pember accused him of obstinacy, and added:

"Waring, I think a man should make allowances for his dominating traits in matters of this kind. Your tendency to see a thing through, to hang on to the bitter end, is very nice in ordinary, everyday matters; but it is going to get us into trouble in this. Here you go, plugging blithely along as though there weren't ninety lives hanging——"

"Blithely, hell!" interrupted Waring, with a glint of combat in his gray eyes. "In the face of all these emotional outbursts? Well, hardly. Give me something besides fear to bite on and I'll argue with you. Give me some practical evidence that we are about to break into the Golden Isle." He could not understand why Pember had not mentioned Guest in support of his argument, as it evidently had been a visit from Guest that had upset him.

Diplomatic relations between the president and the manager of the Tyee Mine were becoming strained. Although Pember went underground frequently he did not seem to wish to make these excursions in Waring's company. That Pember would go in the mine at all was somewhat of a surprise to Waring as the latter did not entertain a very high opinion of Pember's courage, especially in the light of his oft expressed fear as to the safety of the mine.

It was with considerable relief that Waring bade Pember good-by when the latter departed for the East. As a parting shot, Pember informed him that he would use his influence to convince the board of directors that the operation of the Tyee was no longer advisable.

IT SOON became evident to Waring that from some source systematic propaganda was keeping alive the fear among the men that the Tyee Mine would be engulfed. The miners were becoming more and more uneasy. Each day saw some of the more timid among them draw their time and leave. There was no longer good-natured banter among them, and the feeling of cheer which had pervaded the boarding house gave place to an atmosphere of gloom. The men ate their meals in silence and then drew aside in small groups, serious of countenance, and talked in low tones.

This was a condition which Waring found hard to combat. No man came to him and said that he was afraid that they were going to break into the Isle workings and be drowned. He would have met as simple a thing as that with a good, stiff argument. But the men were not like that. Ordinarily, they did not give their reasons for quitting; and in this case they simply stayed as long as they dared and then left. Waring would but have weakened his position by asserting out of a clear sky:

"This mine is safe. There's no danger of breaking into the Golden Isle workings."

At a time when it appeared that there would be an exodus of the men, Waring received orders from the board of directors to close down the mine. Pember had won his point.

When the last man had gone; when the mill was silent and the machine shop deserted; when the only sounds were the lapping of the waves on the rocky shore and the unmusical cries of sea gulls investigating the possibilities of the buildings as resting places—that soon did the Tyee begin to assume somewhat the aspect of its dreary, abandoned neighbor, the Golden Isle. Waring wandered about, viewing, almost in awe, the different places about the mine which so lately had been the centers of activity. He visited the collar of the shaft, down which for years had been lowered powerful, rubber clad miners, and dynamite and things made of steel with which they conquered the uncompromising rock. The blacksmith shop, which had rung with the clash of steel; and the great mill stamps now hanging impotently above the mortars in which they had beaten the gold from the ore—all silent. The stock of the Tyee Company was now worthless.

Still, as Waring saw it, there was one chance for the Tyee. If a tunnel were driven from the Tyee workings, far enough over into the Golden Isle territory, and it did not break into the Isle workings—that would prove that the mine was safe. The Tyee would operate again and have many profitable years ahead of it. But if the tunnel approached those old workings, the pressure of the sea bearing down into the Isle workings would crush the intervening rock like an egg shell. Waring gave no thought to that contingency. He decided to drive the tunnel himself.

The directors had instructed him to leave a caretaker at the property. He would take the place of the caretaker. There were sufficient supplies left on hand to serve his purpose. Waring decided that the five hundred foot level was the best point from which to drive the tunnel, for there he could dump his broken rock into a wince which led to an open stope below, and thus avoid having to hoist it out of the mine.

It had been some time since Waring had served his time on the handle of a spring point shovel, and while he had occasionally put in a hole with a drifting machine in order to keep in practice, his muscles were not used to that kind of labor.

He began his work too vigorously. By the end of the first week his shoulders and legs were lame and stiff and he could not straighten his fingers, which seemed permanently crooked to fit a pick handle. But he was strong. His hundred and seventy-five pounds were well placed and he knew how to use them to the best advantage.

Lonesomeness was Waring's greatest trial. It is one thing to work within hearing of the ring of another's pick, or the chatter of an air drill in the distance; to be able to exchange, occasionally, the commonplaces of the day with a fellow worker; but it is quite another thing to work alone.

He did not make a large tunnel—just room enough to allow the holes to break well. It would go faster that way; he would have less drilling to do and less muck to tram out. He drilled the holes, eight to the round, blasted them, shoveled the broken rock into an ore car and trammed it out and dumped it into the old stope. He sharpened his drill steel and laid the rails for the car track and was thankful that he had served his time at all the jobs around a mine and had learned how to do these things with his own hands.

Each day saw the face of Waring's tunnel a few feet farther into the dangerous territory, each day a few feet nearer disaster or the proof that his judgment was right. He gradually increased the number of his working hours until he worked all the day and half the night. His hands became heavily calloused, his waist exceedingly lean and his eyes bloodshot. He detected himself pausing occasionally in his work and listening. Listening for what? He did not know, and he laughed at himself. But it was not a merry laugh. He was too weary for more than a hollow chuckle.

The tunnel was making a great deal of water. The cut holes were always full and occasionally a back hole would spout a stream. Was it natural seepage from the inlet, or did it come from the Isle workings?

Drill and blast, muck and tram . . . Waring tried to keep from thinking of the Isle workings, but it was not easy. Somewhere ahead of him were great stopes and many tunnels, full of water. And the men were there, too; the men who, when the sea broke in upon them, were doing what he was doing now. But still he mucked and drilled, blasted and trammed and then plodded wearily out of the mine to take a few hours of rest.

Guest would not have thought that Waring looked like a fighter now. He looked like a big tired boy who needed a great deal of rest and some good wholesome food. And as to his having the instincts of an engineer—it is doubtful if any of his instincts were functioning, except his instinct to go ahead. He had a feeling that he had been working in that tunnel forever. His sleep was not as restful now. Sometimes he would awake to find himself sitting up in bed and feeling of the wall at his side or pounding on it with his fist in the belief that he was sounding the face of the tunnel with a pick.

Physical weariness weakened his resistance to what he had called the emotional outbursts of Pember and Guest, and to the implication conveyed by the uneasiness of the miners before the mine was shut down. Sometimes he feared that it was foolhardy to keep driving ahead, supported only by his meager geological evidence, into a territory which popular opinion deemed it suicide to invade. But he quieted such worries as these with the thought that if he could push that tunnel ahead far enough it would restore the now worthless stock in the Tyee Company to its former value. His friends' savings would be protected, and what was of considerable importance to him, he would be able to look them in the eye again.

So he mucked and trammed, and drilled and blasted. Each week he added another set of rails to the track in the tunnel and each week he took up his belt another notch. His face became pinched around the base of his nose and his eyes were dull, for he worked long hours and gave too little thought to proper meals and sufficient rest.

The tunnel progressed. Each round of holes added a few feet to the length of the tunnel and months to the life of the Tyee. Waring knew at last, without a doubt, that he had driven the tunnel far enough to prove that the Tyee was safe. His survey showed that it reached well out into Golden Isle ground, wiping out forever the menace of the flooded Golden Isle workings. He had won. He would make his findings known to the board of directors. The Tyee would get under way again.

WHEN Waring was picking down from the face of the tunnel the loose rock which the last round of holes had shaken, he noticed that there was a change in the ground. The rock was softer and it was somewhat disintegrated along the fractures. There was considerable iron stain in evidence and the amount of water had increased noticeably. He was still speculating about this when he quit work that night.

He climbed wearily up the five hundred feet of manway ladder to the surface and then turned toward his sleeping quarters. It was somewhat past midnight. A gentle wind was blowing in from the inlet and Waring could hear the waves lapping along the rocky shore below the camp. He breathed in the salt air eagerly, for it tasted good and helped to drive out from his system the sickening powder fumes which he had been absorbing night and day. As he was passing the office he noticed a thin ray of light shining out past the edge of the closely drawn shade of the map room window.

"That's strange," he thought. "Who can that be? I left that shade up."

He extinguished his light quickly and stole to the office door. Fortunately, he was able to open the door without making a sound and he stepped quietly into his office.

The door from his private office into the map room was open, and he could see a pale reflection of light on the walls. Two steps more enabled him to see a circular beam of light, such as is cast by an electric flashlight, playing about on a map which was spread on the draughting table. He recognized it as the map which showed the Tyee's ore reserves. The light bobbed about on the map for a moment and then focused on a pad of paper upon which a white hand, with a pencil between its slender fingers, made rapid notes.

Waring stepped softly over and turned the light switch near the door, and the map room became brilliantly lighted. Perched on the high draughting stool, with white head bent intently over the table, was a jaunty little figure of a man.

"Guest!" exclaimed Waring. "What are you doing here?"

The little old man slid down from the stool gracefully.

"Ah—Mister Waring. I am surprised to find you here. Man, but I hardly recognized you. You have changed," said Guest easily in his startling bass.

"What are you doing in this office?" repeated Waring angrily.

"Calm yourself, Mister Waring. I have

nothing to hide. Knowing that the mine was closed down I thought that I might come here and find some way in which I could invest my—ah—money profitably in the Tyee."

"You lied to me about the mine. About your map. The Tyee is safe. I have proved it." Waring pounded the table with his fist in exasperation at the fact that this was a little old man upon whom he could not give vent to his feelings by one burst of pugilistic fury.

"Merely good salesmanship, my boy. Perhaps a little—ah—unethical, but the only way." Waring noticed that Guest was dressed richly, in clothes of ultra-fashionable cut.

"I had to sell my map. And, of course, I had to sell it un-sight and unseen," continued Guest. "Therefore, I had to create in my prospective purchaser a desire for the map."

Waring glared at him and leaned wearily against the table.

"Mister Pember was glad to buy my map and pay my price," Guest announced with a shrewd smile.

"Pember bought it?" asked Waring in surprise. "Then they knew that the mine was safe when they ordered it closed down! Your map showed that the Golden Isle workings were nowhere near the side line, didn't it?"

"Oh, yes. It showed that the Tyee was quite safe. Mister Pember bought the map personally. Your directors never knew of its existence."

"What? You mean that you saw Pember only, and that he bought the map without letting the other directors know anything about it?"

"Exactly," replied Guest. Then with a shrewd squint in his pale gray eyes, he added, "In fact, Mister Pember was so well impressed by the little talk I made him—much the same talk as I made you—that he paid me an extra thousand dollars to go before the board of directors and—ah—throw a scare into them, as you might say. Of course, I didn't mention the map to them. Rather—ah—unethical, perhaps, but the only way."

"Unethical, hell!" sputtered Waring. "Why don't you call it what it is—lies? What do you care about ethics? You, with your sanctimonious pose and your damn map. Why, that map didn't belong to you in the first place. It was part of the Golden Isle property."

The little man's thin features puckered into a wry smile.

"You are harsh, my boy," he replied in mock humiliation. Then he chuckled and added: "But, as I said to myself when dealing with Mister Pember, 'After all, there is no honor even among thieves.'" Waring glared at the old man impotently.

"You can go now," he said. "And don't come back, or I'll—I'll dip you in the sump!"

Guest smiled indulgently.

"A boyish outburst, Mister Waring. No doubt you are tired. You look it." He walked toward the door with dignity, then turned and added: "And perhaps, after all, you are slightly justified in your anger." He bowed himself gracefully out of the door and into the darkness.

Waring sat on the stool lately vacated by Andrew Guest and wondered why Pember would be so anxious to have the mine closed down when he knew that it was safe. According to Guest's statement the Golden Isle map was in Pember's possession when the president made that last visit to the mine and tried so hard to persuade Waring to recommend that the mine be closed down. Pember was a heavy stockholder in the company and had profited steadily by those holdings. Waring had thought at the time that it was very unlike him to wish to end a profitable enterprise, no matter what the conditions.

At any rate, the Tyee was safe. He did not need Guest's map to prove that, for his long tunnel, reaching out into Golden Isle territory showed that the workings of the flooded mine had not approached the mutual side line. The Tyee would operate again. Once more the camp, so quiet these long months, would bustle with activity. The mill would resume its rhythmic roar and there would be laughter in the boarding house. Waring longed for the sound of laughter.

BUT he continued to work in the tunnel, for the change in the rock, which his last round of holes had shown, aroused his geological curiosity. A week later he abandoned drill and shovel long enough to do some surveying, and he mapped the results excitedly. Then he made a trip to the county seat.

When Waring returned, after an absence of three days, he resumed his work in the tunnel. He worked there as vigorously as he had before and he also spent considerable time surveying in the mine and studying his mine maps. He drilled and blasted, and mucked and trammed until his feet were leaden; until his shoulders were stooped and his head wobbled with fatigue as he walked. Then he made another trip to the county seat.

Upon his return to the mine this time he was surprised to find Pember in the office. Evidently he had just arrived, for he was seated in a swivel-chair with his ponderous legs sprawled out in front of him, puffing from the exertion of carrying his hand baggage, which was on the floor beside him. A glimpse of a broad, corduroy clad back bending over the draughting table in the map room showed Waring that Pember was not alone.

"You here, Waring?" puffed Pember, in astonishment. "Why?"

"The directors instructed me to leave a caretaker here. I'm the caretaker," replied Waring, evenly, with a twinkle of amusement in his bloodshot eyes.

"Well, you're relieved. Make your departure hasty," snarled Pember.

"That will require an order from the board of directors."

"Board of directors, bah! There's no board of directors. I'm the board of directors. I own all of the Tyee stock—all of it, I tell you." His eyes glittered with greed. Waring leaned against his desk and stared at Pember with loathing. He would have taken an unholy delight in mauling the man.

There was no sign of fear in Pember's eyes. Evidently he knew that his years and his physical unfitness would protect him from the younger man's fists. Waring's tone was scathing as he spat out the words:

"So that was your game, was it? Knowing all the time that the mine was safe you deliberately went about it to get it closed down. When the price of the stock went down as a consequence you bought it all up for little or nothing."

"You're fired, get out," blurted Pember. "Mister Stevens here is taking charge as manager." Evidently the man whom Waring had glimpsed in the map room heard his name spoken, for he came to the door. Waring turned toward the newcomer and saw a broad shouldered young man with a lean, deeply tanned face which had been pitifully scarred by smallpox, twinkling blue eyes and a crisp, closely cropped blond pompadour.

"Steve!" exclaimed Waring. "Well, I'm a son of a gun!"

"Stuart Waring! Well, I'll be damned!"

They shook hands vigorously, whacked each other on the back and grinned boyishly.

"Haven't seen you since we worked together at the Silver Emblem," said Waring joyously, for he was starved for congenial companionship. "Where have you been all these years, Steve?"

"The last three in Mexico. Then I no sooner get back to God's country than Mister Pember here engages me to come out here and operate the Tyee," replied Stevens, shoving an open cigaret case at Waring. They smoked and exchanged sketchy outlines of their wanderings since they had worked together at the Silver Emblem Mine, until finally Waring turned to Pember:

"Well, let's get down to business and get it over with," he said airily. "I've got something down in the mine I want to show you. We'll take this map and go down."

Evidently Pember knew men well enough to discern that Waring really had something to show him. So the three of them went down in the mine.

On the fifth level Waring led them along his tunnel until they came to the place where he had struck the change of ground. His subsequent work had exposed an eight foot vein of ore standing almost vertically and running at right angles to the tunnel.

"That is the Tyee vein—clear over here in Golden Isle territory," announced Waring, pointing to the ore. "The character of the ore is unmistakable. There is a change in its dip and that brought it over here." He pointed to a timbered chute and manway. "I've put up a raise there, far enough to prove that the Tyee vein apexes in Golden Isle territory." He looked at Pember triumphantly. "You know the law, Pember—the law of apex and extralateral rights. My work shows that the vein which we have been working in the Tyee apexes on the Golden Isle ound and therefore belongs to the Golden le.”

“Rot!” exploded Pember. “Absolute t!” And he flashed his mine lamp from e ore to the raise. But, bluffer that he as, he could not hide the fear which ept into his greedy eyes. Waring was atching him, and when a shrewd thought as reflected in Pember's eyes he said:

“I've already done what you're think- g about, Pember.” He pulled a legal ocument from his pocket. “Here is a x deed to the Golden Isle property. I'm e owner of the Golden Isle. I bought e old mine from the county for a sur- isingly small sum.” He could not keep note of exultation from his voice.

Pember's heavy features were bloated ith rage as he glanced at the deed.

“That's not the Tyee vein!” he roared. You never can prove that it is! I'll fight ou in every court in the country!” He rned to Stevens. “You make a thor- gh investigation of this, Stevens. Start it right now. And Waring, you take our bag and baggage and get off this operty.”

But while Stevens was making his geo- gical examination, Waring was busy in e office making a map which illustrated e upper part of the Tyee vein on Golden le ground. Also, he drew up some pa- rs which, when finished, he laid aside r the present. Pember spent the time alking about the camp in a menacing anner, and his face was ugly and shed.

When Stevens had completed his inves- gation, and after he had made his report Pember, Waring entered the office and id his papers on the desk before them. “This,” he said to Pember, “is your resignation as president and director of the Tyee Company. And this is a twenty year option on your original block of Tyee stock at one cent a share, in my favor. As long as you keep your greedy hands off Tyee affairs, I'll not exercise the option and you may keep your stock. The balance of the stock—that which you bought up since the mine closed down—you will turn in to the company for redistribution.

“I propose to turn the Golden Isle mine over to the Tyee Company for a moderate sum and run the Tyee as I see fit from now on. Without that ore, which now belongs to me, the Tyee is blocked and you can do nothing. Right now is your only chance to sign.”

Before Waring finished Pember had drawn his breath as though about to launch into a characteristic tirade, but he let it out with almost a sigh and turned to Stevens with fear and questioning in his eyes.

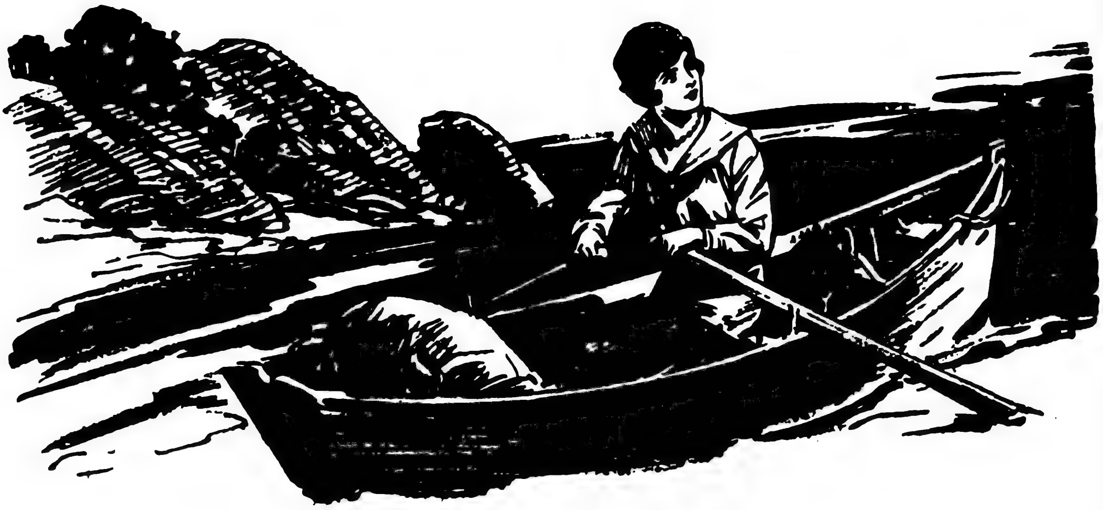
“Mister Pember,” began Stevens, solemnly, “I'm speaking now as your consulting engineer. There is no doubt that the Tyee ore apexes on the Golden Isle property, and therefore belongs to the Golden Isle. To contest it in court would be useless. As Waring unquestionably has title to the Golden Isle the best thing you can do is to accede to his demands. If he brings suit against the Tyee, he will win and you will lose everything. If you do as he wishes you can keep your original block of stock.” Stevens' reputation was such that Pember could not doubt his sincerity or the value of his advice.

He picked up a pen, and the nails of his thick fingers turned white as they grasped it. He wrote his name in heavy, tremulous lines.

In the next issue there will appear an exciting story of the oil fields, “Roaring Gold,” by Raoul F. Whitfield; a tale of the hard, unscrupulous men who seek fabulous fortunes beneath the surface of the earth.

STRANGE CARGO

By THOMAS KINGSTON



A Complete Novelette

A SERIES of staccato explosions shattered the peace of the otherwise quiet countryside. Two squirrels hustled up a tree and peered angrily down at an ancient Lancia which staggered to the hilltop overlooking Long Island Sound and with a last violent protest drew to the side of the road and stopped. Emerged from the chariot an entirely untroubled young goddess, straight backed, slim waisted and close cropped as a boy. Only the delightful curves of nineteen strictly feminine years revealed the truth—for the young and personable person was clad in badly worn riding togs that were quite sexless.

The odds are too long for betting that a man would have cussed. But not the lady; and this in a day and age when lovely young things can and sometimes do cuss with easy proficiency.

"Poor old Patchy!" The voice was so agreeable that you might have thought the decrepit old Lancia would make one more effort. It didn't. In spite of the fact that its laboring engine was disengaged from the slavery of gears it gave one long, lingering cough and died.

This was too much for the squirrels; they scolded as they fled. But the girl was unruffled. With professional sureness she lifted the hood and got to work, murmuring the while:

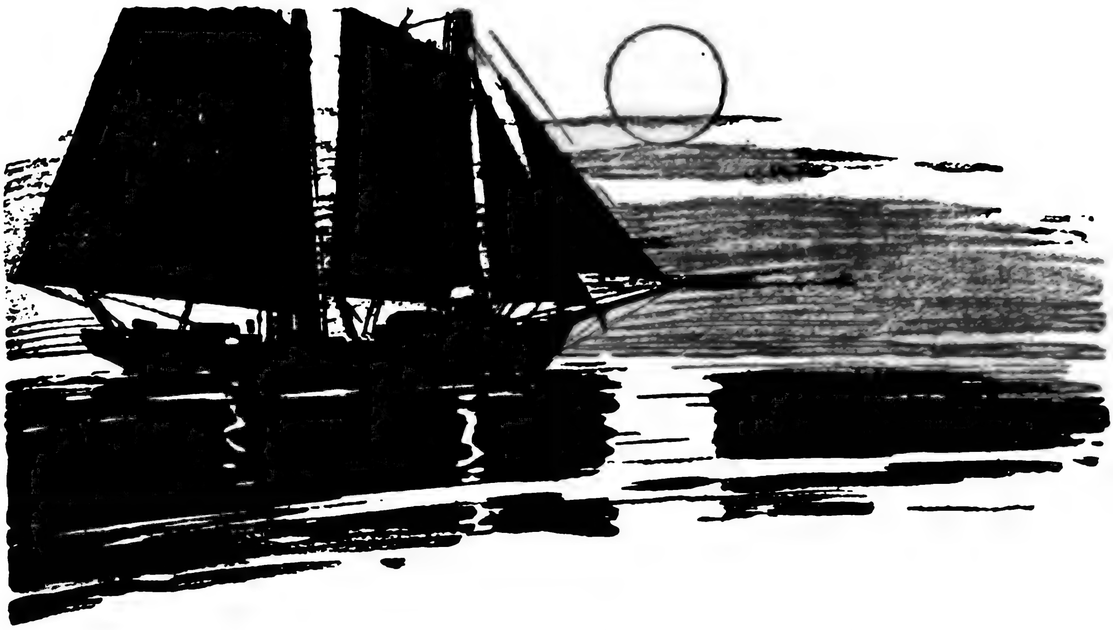
"Was her old timer all set wrong and did she have gas on her poor tummy?"

Followed some moments of question without answer, punctuating skilled adjustments of the Lancia's internal workings. Then the girl was back at the wheel again, the self-starter ground its tune—and nothing happened.

This time a slight frown troubled the serenity of the smooth brow.

"I don't understand what's got into you, Patchy," she said, and was still thinking out loud when a shower of gravel down the hillside announced the somewhat precipitate arrival of a somewhat disheveled young man.

"Saw you were in trouble. Thought I might help," he grinned as he brushed the dirt from his clothes and met the suprised stare of a pair of gray eyes with an amused look from pleasant blue ones.



Here Is a Splendid, Thrilling Tale That Opens in the Peaceful Sunshine of Long Island Sound—and Closes Amid Mutiny and Murder on the Perilous High Seas

The girl bowed a cool acknowledgment. She despised helpful males. Usually they knew less than nothing about temperaments of ancient motors and used their ignorance as a gambit of flirtation. This sort of thing had happened before and she knew quite well how to deal with it. She was about to turn on the withering blast. But on the first word she stopped—stopped so suddenly that her mouth remained open, and for the moment she looked as stupid as is possible for a remarkably pretty girl who isn't stupid at all.

The human landslide, after that first glance, had turned to the motor and was raising the hood even more deftly than the mistress of the junk pile had done a few moments before. He went to work at once, humming a little tuneless song as he fiddled about. Then presently:

"Step on the starter—please."

The "please" was a delayed pass and the girl's face flushed, but she did as she was bidden. The engine picked up rhythm at once and purred approval.

"There. You're all right now. Interesting old boat," suggested the rescuer, and again the engaging grin displayed what the girl decided were very nice teeth, quite worthy of anybody's smile.

So she smiled back.

"Thanks a lot. I didn't suppose anybody but me could do anything for Patchy."

"Why 'Patchy'?"

"Easy to see, I'd think. This noble steed was once a Lancia, but it's been built into and over and around so many times there's not much left of the original. Hence, 'Patchy'."

"That's a kind of introduction, isn't it?" The suggestion was backed by another friendly grin, and the lady in the chariot capitulated.

"I'm Sonia Harbison," she said. "Dad and I live in the white cottage on Weldon's Cove, and Patchy and I are much obliged to you."

The boy bowed.

"I," he said quite formally, "am Robert Lowry, of—late of—" He stammered and for the first time the appearance of being perfectly at ease deserted him. "Late of so many places that it doesn't matter."

he managed at last. "Except," he added hastily, "the lack of a conventional background hardly gives me the right to call. And I would like to know more about—Patchy."

The grin was little more than a wistful smile now.

"Good-by, Miss Harbison," he said, and stood aside as Patchy rumbled into first.

"Good-by," she called back, and then leaning far out added: "Patchy will always be glad to see you."

She was gone in an easy swoop around a curve in the road. Lowry watched the car disappear, ran to a point where there was a glimpse of the road farther down, and then sat down on a rock.

"What a girl! A real, honest-to-goodness girl!"

VERY much the same line of thought was at that moment occupying John Harbison's mind with the difference in tempo due to the fact that he was Sonia's father while the young man on the hilltop was considering her in a quite different relationship. If Robert Lowry was thinking of Sonia with the exaltation of the discovery that he had fallen in love quite as precipitately as he had fallen down the hillside, Harbison was thinking of his daughter with the wistfulness of one who desires to give all he has for the security and comfort of a loved one and knows he has little or nothing to give. His mind was occupied with memories of Sonia's mother, of the days when John Harbison had everything to give that money and power command, and with speculations about Sonia's future, when the ancient car slid up with a triumphant roar. Sonia, windblown and lovely, ran up the steps of the veranda.

"Oh, dad, Patchy laid down on me at the top of Sargent's Hill and I met the nicest young man in the worst clothes you ever saw."

Proceeding with her rapid-fire recital, Sonia dropped into a chair opposite her father. Harbison was aware of a new light in her eyes. This Robert Lowry, of nowhere-in-particular, had made a very marked impression on a usually unimpressionable young woman. When she had gone inside, her father returned to his thinking with renewed earnestness.

He reviewed the circumstances, largely connected with his marriage to the lov daughter of the counselor of the Russi Legation, which had led to his heavy i vestments in Russian securities and t wiping out of his fortune by the red ti of revolution. That had been the first o a series of catastrophes by which Fate h seemed intent upon rewriting an old melo drama and retitling it "From Riches t Rags." The death of Sonia's mother h occurred during the first act of the dram and Sonia herself, he reasoned, could hardl remember the bright years of her life whe John Harbison's name was synonymo with wealth and when he was famous a the most expert yachtsman of his day holding the transatlantic record for vesse under sail.

Only a few tarnished silver cups stored in the attic of the cottage remained a mementos of that day. Harbison had sunk into a kind of apathy after his wife's death, and when only further disaster resulted from his half hearted attempts t recoup his fortunes, he had sold out everything he possessed, bought the cove cottag and had dropped quietly out of sight o old friends. There, he had found new interest in life in watching Sonia. How quite unconscious of any cloud, she romped into girlhood on the beach, learning early to swim and sail under his expert tutelag and finding life abundantly good. Theirs was a most delightful comradeship.

Now, Sonia was no longer a child. The knowledge troubled Harbison. He was staring out over the placid waters of the cove in a brown study when Sonia reappeared.

"What's the trouble, old chap?"

"You, Sonia. You've grown up overnight. I've been idling too long. It's time for me to think about duty, girl. You ought to have opportunities to know more people. You ought to go to a decent school. You ought——"

He got no further, because a man can't very well talk with a pair of strong young arms tight about his neck.

"Stop you-oughting, dad. I'm happy and I'm sure no school could have taught me all the things you have. I know enough math to pass an examination in navigation, I can read two languages besides my own, I know twice as much about books as most girls do, and I can beat anyone along this shore at sailing and swimming. And esides," she added proudly, "I am a dandy utomobile mechanic, the best—well, any-ay the second best—greaseball I know. 'd have said 'best' before I met the Lowry oy. He certainly knows his differentials."

They chatted a few moments more in he gay comradeship that was more natural han the anxious mood in which the talk ad begun, and then Sonia went down to he beach.

Left alone, Harbison came to a swift ecision. Tomorrow he would go to New 'ork, have a talk with his old friend alcolm Hart, the lawyer who handled is affairs, and see if there wasn't some ay to add to the income which, while it fficed to keep Cove Cottage, left no argin for carrying out his wish to intro-uce Sonia to a larger world.

When Sonia, next morning, returned to he cove after driving her father to the rain, she felt lonely for almost the first ime in her life. She sat on the veranda nd gazed across the cove, much as her ather had done on the previous afternoon. aint recollections of her early childhood ere stirring in the recesses of her mind. he tried in vain to piece them together nto a connected story. What did it atter? She was happy here. Suppose hey had all that money again, would it ean more contentment? She tried think-ng of things she would like to have. A ew motor? No, Patchy was more fun. bigger boat than the tiny knockabout hat lay at its buoy in the cove? Perhaps. t would be good to sail out through the ound and see what the ocean had to ffer . . . And far lands. But her mind efused to dwell on these matters. It in-isted, instead, on recalling a pleasant faced oung man in shabby clothes who, Sonia hought, would be nice to have as a friend. And at once she felt lonelier than ever. he had invited him to call—on Patchy. That was a long yesterday and he was slow n coming.

"Snap out of it, Sonia," she admonished erself, and went to put on her bathing uit. Ten minutes later she was no longer lonely child puzzled by the ancient prob-ems of growing up but a happy mermaid leaving the clear water of the cove with asy grace. She swam steadily out until watcher on the shore would have been ost to sight among the miniature billows of he Sound.

Even in these days of almost amphibious youngsters the sight of a girl swimming alone, something better than a mile from shore, is not usual, and the captain of the *Cygnet* grunted a salty disapproval as his glasses disclosed the nature of the object he had sighted. He motioned the man at the yacht's wheel to change the course and set the engine room telegraph at SLOW. As the boat neared Sonia the captain hailed through a megaphone:

"Pretty far out, aren't you? Better let me send a boat to take you back."

But Sonia, treading water, waved a negligent hand and shouted a cheery reassurance and refusal. The captain grunted, but he ordered the yacht back on her course and full speed ahead.

As the *Cygnet* sped past, Sonia caught a glimpse of a group of men and women on her after deck. They had gathered near the rail, curious as to the captain's hail, and Sonia's eyes opened wide as she saw a young man who surely was—no, it couldn't be—but yet . . . A wisp of spray obscured her vision and when she had cleared her eyes the yacht had gathered way and was too far off for faces to be distinguished. Sonia turned towards shore, almost certain that she had again seen Mr. Robert Lowry, of nowhere-in-particular. But a quite immaculate Robert Lowry, very much at home on the deck of the sort of craft that as a rule entertains only persons who are very much from somewhere.

AT ABOUT that same hour John Harbison was sitting at lunch in a downtown New York restaurant. It was one of those places where the tables are set in little booths open on one side, booths which have a deceptive air of privacy. Harbison's ear was caught by the sound of rapidly spoken Spanish. It had been a long time since he had heard the language spoken and he found relief from his thoughts by frankly listening in. After a moment he was keenly interested.

Two men in the next booth were discussing some sort of adventure by sea. He caught the words and phrases—"risky", "good navigator", "no steamboat sailor", and several times the expression, "safe man." Apparently they were discussing ways and means to secure a master for a sailing vessel in which a voyage was to be made to a Central American port to bring back someone who wished to enter the United States secretly and without formality in departure or arrival.

Sensing that the hidden men were nearing the end of their discussion and would soon be leaving, Harbison called for his check. Before it came, his neighbors left their booth and he was able to observe them as they halted for a moment at the cigar stand near the door. Both were well dressed and had the appearance of prosperous Spanish-American business men. One, Harbison thought, might possibly be a lawyer or a doctor; he had that indefinable something that suggests the professional man.

When the men went out, Harbison followed, a half-defined intention forming to introduce himself, admit that he had overheard their talk and offer himself for the job they had in mind, providing he could satisfy himself that it was a political and not criminal refugee in whom they were interested. Risky jobs paid well, he reasoned, and after the morning talk with Hart he felt more than ever the need to find a way of adding to his dwindling income.

Harbison was hurrying after the strangers, and had nearly caught up with them when they stopped while one of them greeted a man whom Harbison knew very well. It was Elton Hill, the famous district head of the United States Secret Service. He and Harbison were old acquaintances, and something more; for they had always had a genuine liking for one another. The younger Spaniard was introducing his companion with much formality, but when the introduction was concluded he chatted easily and with an air of familiarity with Hill, speaking English fluently.

They passed on, and a moment later Hill was greeting Harbison. The latter fell into step with the Secret Service chief and after they had exhausted the aimless but pleasant small talk of old friends meeting after a lapse of some time, Harbison inquired about the Spanish-Americans. He was told that one was Juan Gomez a former attaché of the Colombian Legation, and that his associate was a Dr. Francisco Excobar, whom Hill had met for the first time.

"It's funny about Gomez," said Hill. "As you know, I have some reputation
remembering faces—it's part of my sto
in trade. But I'm not at all certain
would have known Gomez if he had not
called himself, although I often saw
when he was stationed at Washington.
says he's staying at the Ritz. Invited
to lunch with him some day. When
knew him in Washington he was an am
ing person, and sometimes useful; had
lot of unusual information about Lati
American matters. Maybe I'll look
up."

Harbison had what he considered
inspiration in intrigue.

"You say he is well informed on Lati
American matters," he remarked casuall
"I have some of the last of my money
an oil concession in Colombia. Think
could tell me anything about matters do
there?"

Hill thought that Gomez might and,
fore they parted, had stopped in at
Waldorf to pen a note of introduction
Harbison. Two hours later Harbison
facing Gomez in the latter's obviously
pensive suite at the Ritz.

Harbison knew the Latin penchant
indirection, but he decided that his be
policy was an unmistakable frankne
He explained that he had partly overhea
the conversation in the resturant and
he was interested in securing the place
master of the vessel which was to unde
take the mission.

Gomez listened quietly and, when Ha
bison had finished, said with an air
puzzlement:

"But, señor, you are obviously a gentl
man. Why should you wish to mix in th
affair?"

"Broke," said Harbison bluntly. "I nee
to earn some money and I need to earn i
right away. I am a competent navigato
and I am not a competent anything else."

Gomez smiled, but his eyes were furtiv
He still held Hill's note in his hand. No
he waved it with a significant gesture.

"This note from Captain Hill . . . D
you not realize, señor, that it is a stran
introduction to bring a man whom yo
guess to be planning something outside t
law, something in which, perhaps, yo
Government might have an interest?"

Harbison's own smile was disarming.

"Of course, you're right," he sai
"Somehow, I took it for granted that yo

e planning to rescue some political who found things too hot for him in his ne town and wanted to get into the ited States without letting his enemies w about it. I suppose landing here hout the formality of quarantine or toms is breaking the law, but I wouldn't that much on my conscience. The portant thing to me was my reasoning t if you could afford to send a vessel th on such a venture you would pay l for the right man to command her. for Hill; he presented himself as an portune—and the only—means of reach- you. I fear I was too impulsive."

Harbison rose and, bowing formally, was his way to the door when Gomez halted n.

"But a moment, señor. You are perhaps very man we seek. Providence may pleased to play on our side. Also, if I trust you, it is also apparent that you eady know too much for my comfort. suggest, señor, that you give me a day, which to make certain inquiries, and t we meet here. Or better, that you form me where I can reach you tomorrow the next day."

Harbison considered. He was beginning realize that his impulsiveness might e gotten him into delicate affairs which re none of his own. Much too romantic, s whole situation. Well, he would bring down to earth.

"Quite willing to have you investigate ," he said. "But you have forgotten part of it. What do I get?"

Without realizing it, Harbison had made e best move in the world to convince mez of his sincerity. The Latin-Ameri- n had nothing but suspicion for a Yankee o didn't think in terms of money. He wed a negligent hand.

"Five thousand dollars," Gomez said.

Again, Harbison thought a moment. . . . gh wages, indeed, to command a vessel r one voyage. . . This must be more of affair than appeared on the surface. . . t five thousand dollars would mean a eat deal in his plans for Sonia.

"That will suit me," he said. "Go ahead th your investigation. You can reach e here." He pulled Hill's note toward m and scribbled on the back of it the lephone number of Cove Cottage.

On the way back on the train Harbison t more light hearted than he had in months. He was a bit surprised to find that at his age he still thrilled to the idea of adventure.

It would be good to have a deck under his feet again. That note from Hill had been a blunder, to be sure; but if Gomez was as clever as he appeared to be, he probably would find out that Harbison had told the truth.

WHEN Sonia reached shore she sat for a time on the little beach of the cove. She was puzzled, and she didn't like puzzles when they were associated with people in whom she had an interest.

"Well," she said at last, "I don't suppose I'll ever see him again, anyway. Better stop thinking and get dressed."

But when she came out to sit on the veranda a little later she was dressed, not in the old riding clothes which she usually wore because they left her free for any of her enterprises, but in a summery dress of pleasantly blended colors which made a charming and entirely feminine setting for a pretty girl. It might almost have seemed that she was still expecting Mr. Robert Lowry.

And presently, he came, clad quite as yesterday in comfortable old clothes that boasted no recent acquaintance with a tailor's pressing iron.

"Good afternoon. Is Patchy behaving today?" he inquired.

"She hasn't had much chance not to," Sonia replied. "I've been for a swim out in the Sound." She paused and regarded him a trifle coldly, before she added, "And I saw a very nice yacht."

To Lowry that announcement apparently lacked special meaning.

"Water warm?" he inquired perfunctorily and returned to the subject of Patchy.

"Well," thought Sonia, "if he wants to be mysterious, let him."

And in a few minutes she had half forgotten her pique in the absorbing business of getting further acquainted.

The result of that was that, when John Harbison alighted from the afternoon train, at which he expected to be met by a welcoming daughter with a politely panting Patchy—there being no doubt about which train to meet because there was only one—he wasn't met at all. If he were to complete his homecoming otherwise than on foot it would have to be in the ancient taxi lined up at the splintery platform.

"This'll do, Al," he said to his driver when they reached the top of the hill half a mile above the cove. "I'll walk it from here."

He wanted to be in action; the possibilities the day had opened up for him had roused his energies of mind and body.

Al pocketed his ample fare and responded to his passenger's farewell gesture. As his car swished the roadside grass in its turn about, Al's uninquiring glance fell on Harbison's striding figure making for the path below the road and he spoke with the condescension of forty-five for fifty:

"The old feller's goin' good yet."

Harbison's racing thoughts covered more than the distance his legs negotiated so briskly. On the train he had lined up plans for getting away on the secret voyage—supposing it really did materialize—without rousing too much amazement and anxiety in Sonia's mind. Now that he drew actually near to her he reviewed them a little doubtfully. Well, why shouldn't this be the "some winter" they had so often contemplated, that Sonia was to spend with Aunt Levnachia in Boston? A winter that Sonia had thus far managed, in the face of her father's obvious reluctance, to postpone. Too bad, really, Harbison thought, that she couldn't go adventuring too. They'd often laughingly planned to, together.

"But pirating would be too tame for us, dad," he remembered Sonia's declaring, one roaring winter evening when they were snug and gay before a driftwood fire. "We'd probably leave it and come back to the cove and the knockabout for a little real excitement."

He smiled now, coming to a dividing of the path, stopped to light a cigaret and greet a friend, a pleased looking little Sealyham who pattered up from the direction the premises which adjoined those of Cove Cottage. Barnum's tail wigwagged that he was glad he'd happened to be busy right around here just now, for he didn't like to miss seeing a neighbor, but that he must go back home because it was so near supper. He would watch Harbison on his way for a minute, though. And so he did.

Harbison thought, and was amused that he did, that nice dogs and nice youngsters are alike; not restless for fun and adventure, but making fun and adventure
of all their trivial activities. Sonia alw
had done that. How hard it would be
leave her. But Boston would be a use
experience. She didn't see nearly eno
people. Yesterday that young man—wh
was his name?—had made a good de
of an impression on her. Still, she had
mentioned him this morning. Probab
had forgotten him by now. She rea
didn't think enough about young me

And having now emerged from the pa
onto his own beach, John Harbison w
brought to a complete and sudden stan
still by the sight of his daughter in a you
man's arms.

His daughter's sensation, at the mome
was not precisely that of surprise. H
first feeling of pique at finding you
Mr. Lowry unwilling to identify hims
as the young man she had seen aboard th
Cygnet a few hours earlier had faded
their talk steered itself into channels
easy friendliness.

They compared tastes, fascinated to fin
how many they agreed upon and ho
delightfully they could disagree on a fe
Bits of background cropped up occasio
ally in Lowry's sentences, but they wer
somehow, not enlightening. Sonia w
sure he was trying to avoid them. He h
played all the games that such few cha
as Sonia knew played; he talked th
language. Once he began what sound
like a retrospect of some very bright a
costly college years, then stopped alm
in confusion. An unthinking "Wh
year—" from Sonia was interrupt
promptly.

"Never stayed long anywhere in
life," he said. "And I haven't a sheepsk
anywhere about me."

But she couldn't feel rebuffed when
blue eyes begged her not to be and
deep, pleasant voice reverted to the char
of Patchy, to those of all motors, old a
new, of anything that spat or chugged
went in any fashion. Why, their enthu
asms were identical!

"That knockabout of yours," he sa
looking longingly at the bobbing cr
anchored off the beach. "She must
the greatest fun in the world."

"Like to try her now?" Sonia sugges
with a boyish concealment of pride.

Would he! They raced each other
the dory.

There was just the breeze to put the little craft through her paces, and Sonia did. Robert Lowry qualified as an able seaman, though he developed a tendency to stop in the middle of a motion to admire his captain. The Sound was at its gorgeous best.

"There isn't a lovelier piece of water anywhere," Lowry said. He spoke as if he were admiring it as a gift from Sonia; and as if, Sonia thought amusedly, he had really seen all the others. As she smiled into his earnest eyes, she felt a new and surprising emotion. Something maternal, she decided that night in bed. And she was probably right.

At the moment she didn't do any analyzing, for they were just coming up to their mooring and she was bent on a slick and seamanly performance. The able seaman helped ably without pausing in what he was saying about a book he wanted her to read at once; he'd bring it up tomorrow if she didn't mind. "Galleons Reach."

"Why that's only just out, isn't it?" Sonia remarked, casting an eye around her to see that all was in order on the knockabout. It was, so she gave Lowry her full attention.

"Out yesterday," he said, close beside her. "I never lose any time——"

And then he caught her in his arms. The boat had taken that instant to bob suddenly, and Sonia, caught off balance, might have gone overboard but for this fortunate readiness on the part of her crew. He held her gently and her cheek rested a willing moment against his rough coat under which something beat thumpily. And it seemed the nicest place she had ever been.

But well trained muscles will assert themselves. Sonia's began to brace up; and her eyes, too shy to seek her rescuer's, looked over his shoulder towards the shore. They fell on a familiar figure standing on the little dock, gazing fixedly in her direction.

Too far away to see the puzzled perturbation on her father's face, Sonia waved a hand as she disengaged herself and called out a cheery greeting. Young Mr. Lowry's emotions were not under so good control, or perhaps they were a so much livelier kind that they had swept him beyond his depth. He was still under their spell as he and Sonia paddled ashore in the dory.

His daughter was so much at her ease that Harbison began to doubt he had understood the tableau that had met his eyes when he first reached the beach. Lowry came out of his daze to make proper acknowledgments of his introduction and the three chatted. Harbison tried with considerable skill to discover the young man's social or business bearings, but without apparent evasion Lowry kept away from personal topics. When he had taken his departure, Harbison had learned merely that Lowry was on vacation, that he was staying on a farm some three miles back from the shore, that he seemed to have traveled extensively and that he had the earmarks of a man of good breeding and education. Yet Lowry had given an impression of frankness, and the older man had instinctively liked him.

After dinner Harbison tackled the job of convincing Sonia that now was the time for all good girls to visit their aunts in Boston. But he was much too vague about his own plans to suit Sonia and finally she cornered him.

"Just what are you up to, dad? You are trying to put something over on your child, and, if you will pardon her, you are even more clumsy about it than you were in trying to find out just who and what is Mister Robert Lowry, the nice young man from nowhere, who is—I may state in passing—coming to call on me tomorrow afternoon."

Harbison blinked, and then told the truth, or at least as much of it as seemed necessary. He was going to take a sailing vessel to a Central American port. The voyage would take about six weeks. He was to be well paid, and they needed the money. He told Sonia more than she had known before about the immediate need of adding to their income and it was an unusually thoughtful Sonia who kissed her father good night after tentatively agreeing to the proposed visit to Aunt Levnachia.

NEXT morning the sparkling crispness of a perfect early September day was a tonic for action rather than thought and it was apparently the usual carefree Sonia who greeted her father at breakfast. He explained that he would have to stick close to the cottage on account of an expected telephone call and

Sonia, after completing her household tasks in efficient fashion, went for a walk along the shore. She carried a book and finally sat down in the shelter of a big rock just above tide level. It was a favorite spot. The great boulder had been the confidant of many of her girlish joys and sorrows; it had been, too, a kind of schoolroom where she had often worked at tasks her father set for her. But this day she gave only a casual glance at her book and then laid it carefully aside. There was so much to think over. She sat very still, piecing together the things her father had told her.

Events were converging around the old rock as events have a way of doing around places. They took active form first in the arrival of the Sealyham that had greeted Sonia's father the previous afternoon. He had been about his lawful concerns along the cove beach when his nose had caught a familiar and friendly scent. Now he came trotting happily around the rock to apprise Sonia in his eloquent, doggish way that he was very fond of her and that he much preferred being with her to hunting small game along the beach. She professed herself equally delighted, and Barnum snuggled against her with a sigh of contentment.

Fifteen minutes later he interrupted her thoughts by jumping to his feet with a brisk challenge. But before Sonia could arise, his sharp bark of question and defiance had changed to the joyful note with which he recognized a friend, and he was bounding down the beach to extend greetings to Robert Lowry.

The young man's arrival several hours before he was expected sent a little wave of pleasure over Sonia. She stood up, with a smile.

"I see you two are already acquainted," she said, "and I am glad Barnum approves of you. He is a most particular dog." This was more personal than she had intended. She felt her color rise and was relieved when Lowry ignored the somewhat obvious opening.

"Oh, yes," he said easily, "Barnum and I met some days ago. I was walking and he was hunting and we combined forces."

When the three were seated by the rock, Sonia realized how glad she was that Lowry had come. She knew nothing whatever about him, to be sure, yet she felt that she knew him very well. Old friends they were, of three days' standing, and Sonia very much wanted a friend just then. For the first time in her life her father had a secret which he was, in large part at least, withholding from her, and she felt a little lonely. It was so easy to talk to this young man, and Sonia was on the point of confiding some of her anxieties when she remembered the incident of the day before. Unless Robert Lowry had a double, this young man beside her in the shabby clothes and careless tie was the spick-and-span young man, the entirely correct young man of the spick-and-span yacht. And so, instead of talking about herself—which Mr. Lowry quite evidently desired—she embarked on a fishing trip.

"Too bad summer's nearly over," she said with easy commonplace. "I suppose your vacation is about ended, too, and that you'll soon be leaving us."

The topic didn't appear to interest Mr. Lowry, but Sonia held to it until she made certain that he was quite aware that she was asking him, as directly as one might, to tell all about himself.

"Well, no," he said at last. "I'm not going back just yet. You see, at the moment, I haven't a very definite job. I—" He hesitated a long moment and then went on. "I was working a while back in an airplane plant, designing a new type of engine and I came here to take a rest and—and——"

He skidded to a stop. Real interest flashed up in Sonia's eyes. An airplane plant!

"Oh, do tell me—" she began.

"Sonia," he interrupted, seemingly unconscious of the intimate address, "there are a great many things I'd like to tell you but I can't, or at least not now. I know it's all—well, a little unusual, my dropping down out of nowhere and making a kind of mystery about myself. Please believe me, I hate it; but I can't help it. Won't you just trust me and let us be friends? I've never known anybody like you and I simply can't lose you because of a silly secret sort of business which I hope you'll believe isn't my fault at all."

Millions of young men since time began have said to millions of young women, "I've never known anybody like you." And, doubtless, each young woman forgave her young man his lack of originality as did Sonia, and found the information as thrilling. She hadn't the slightest reluctance about trusting Robert Lowry; she knew she was doing that right now. And so, trusting, she saw the mystery about him in a new and more engaging aspect. She was about to reply when Barnum interrupted. He jumped up and dashed around the rock, mingling with his bark a throaty growl that was astonishingly menacing, considering his size.

Lowry made a gesture of half amused annoyance at the unwelcome interruption. Sonia sprang up to look over the rock, and her shout of "Stop that! Let that dog be!" brought Lowry up beside her.

An extremely dapper person was aiming vicious, if misdirected, kicks at Barnum, who was charging in valiantly, intent on abolishing the intruder. Sonia's commands to the stranger were mingled with equally insistent ones to Barnum, who obeyed, although reluctantly. He retreated to her side, bristling and growling. The dapper gentleman seemed much relieved.

"I thank you and I am sorry I have disturbed you," he said with a bow and a trace of accent to his English. "I am seeking the residence of a Mister Harbison when your dog decide that he will eat me. If I kick at him, it is my own defense and again I ask your pardon."

Again he bowed, and so formally, that Sonia could not repress a smile. The stranger answered it with a flash of white teeth.

"Perhaps it is my good fortune that you can direct me to the Señor Harbison's house?"

Quieting Barnum's protests Sonia walked toward the stranger.

"I am Miss Harbison," she said. "Our house is just around the bend in the shore there."

More flashing smiles and formal bows as Mr. Gomez introduced himself. Sonia understood at once that this was the man from whom her father had expected a telephone message. She wondered why he had come in person.

Their short walk to the cottage was the occasion for an interchange of only the most formal remarks, but Gomez made no concealment of the fact that he found his guide much more interesting to gaze upon than the natural beauties about which they conversed.

As they approached the cottage, Mr. Harbison rose from a seat on the veranda and came down the steps with a slightly challenging expression in his eyes. His greeting was courteous and noncommital, but he led Gomez up the steps without giving that gentleman a chance for more than a word of acknowledgment to Sonia and a bow of farewell.

"You did not tell me, Señor Harbison, that you had a so beautiful daughter," Sonia heard the visitor remark as he seated himself.

She smiled amusedly as she set off down the beach. Her father's voice reached her, replying in controlled displeasure:

"Our talk, I believe, was a business one. I had been expecting it to be continued by telephone, and since, instead, you have taken the trouble to come down to Cove Cottage let me put myself at once at your service."

Gomez withdrew his gaze from Sonia's vanishing figure.

"Ah, yes. I am come indeed for business." He turned slightly in his chair and faced Harbison. "It has become, since yesterday, señor, a very urgent business. The ship must sail tomorrow."

Harbison gave an exclamation and started to speak. Gomez forstalled him, talking quickly and without pause for some moments. All necessary inquires had been made as to Harbison's fitness for the job, he assured Harbison. And when word had come late last night that delay was growing dangerous at the other end, he had consulted those interested with himself in the enterprise, with the result that here he was, not caring to trust the matter of final arrangement to a suburban telephone wire.

At first, Harbison was inclined to withdraw entirely. Twenty-four hours to put his affairs in order; to assure himself that Sonia was safely bestowed! Yet what was this, after all, but a special job he had wanted to undertake for suitable pay, that was going to take, not the rest of his life, but six weeks at most. He questioned Gomez cautiously. So far as he could discover, no new factors had entered the affair; merely orders from those at the other end of the route to hurry.

Gomez was not stupid. He sensed what was in Harbison's mind.

"This is not, of course, Señor Harbison, a long stay you are to make. Your so delightful home you will return to in these few weeks. Your daughter—would she not enjoy this trip in the southern seas with you? The ship is a comfortable one——"

His host interrupted courteously enough, but with decision.

"She will be with her aunt during my absence."

The toot of an automobile horn made both men start. Gomez looked at his watch and rose, scrambling together his cigaret case and some time tables which he had pulled from his pocket during the talk and laid beside him on the book littered table.

"It is the Jehu," he declared. "He brought me not far enough on my way here and now he makes up for his fault."

Al, it appeared, had dropped Gomez at the path Harbison had taken the day before and, promising to pick up Gomez in time for the afternoon train, had gone back to town at the behest of an empty stomach, forgetting in his haste to warn Gomez at the fork in the path. Gomez, coming to it, had chosen the wrong direction and had finally wandered up the beach.

Another blast from Al, and Harbison led his departing guest through the wide hall to the door to landward, before which the car waited in the faintly marked, grassy track that was Cove Cottage's driveway.

Under cover of the racket of the motor, Harbison and Gomez exchanged last words. At Harbison's nod and gesture of finality, Gomez stepped aboard with a satisfied air and was jolted away.

SONIA and Lowry were comfortably seated on the veranda when Sonia's father came back to it. They drew him instantly into the conversation, but at the first opportunity he excused himself and went indoors. As he passed the telephone in the hall it rang. He lifted the receiver quickly, impatient of the interruption, and at second thought laid the receiver down, calling as he hurried towards the library, "Sonia, will you answer, please?" He closed the door behind him, his thoughts working hard on the task before him.

Lowry rose as Sonia went in, and stood turning over some magazines on the table. A letter lay beside them, out of its envelope, folded backwards so that the heading and salutation caught the eye. A telephone number was scribbled in pencil at the top of the sheet. Lowry's glance took all this in and had completed the first sentence before he could shift it. That was enough to make him aware that Hill, district chief of the Secret Service, had given John Harbison a letter of introduction to one Juan Gomez.

Although his mind automatically recorded what he had read, it meant nothing in particular to him at the moment. He was ill at ease. The interruption caused by Gomez's arrival had broken the spell, and when Sonia had returned to the rock she had given him no opportunity to lead the conversation again into personal channels. Lowry realized that the chance to cement the understanding he had sought with Sonia was gone for the time being. Well, the afternoon was before them and perhaps Sonia would invite him to stay for lunch. He was even prepared to hint that he was a starving young man three miles from his base of supplies. He tried not to listen to Sonia at the telephone, but could not make himself unconscious of her voice.

"It was no trouble at all," he heard her say. And then reproachfully, "You cut me off, operator . . . No, I don't know the number. . . ."

In a moment she returned to the veranda, smiling faintly. Lowry had not time for a word before her father appeared in the doorway and, with an abstracted "Sonia, I want to see you when you are at liberty," disappeared again.

It sounded like Lowry's cue to depart, and he took it promptly. Sonia softened the hardship by walking with him to the first bend in the path. Her leave-taking there was quick and casual, but she was ready with a gay salute when, a moment later, he slowed his steps and looked back to catch her doing the same.

Then she really hurried back to the house. She found her father busy over a collection of clothes and nautical instruments.

"I find I must sail at once," he said—"I'll telephone the telegraph office a message to your aunt and you'll have to be ready to catch the night train to Boston. Better motor to New London and leave your car there to be picked up when you come home."

Sonia, swept away by the speed with which things were happening, could only gasp at first. Then she demanded particulars.

"Why, dad, I don't even know the name of the vessel you are to sail; or where you are going or how to reach you if anything happened. You can't just disappear into the broad Atlantic this way, leaving a perfectly good daughter to wonder if she really ever did have a dad."

Harbison saw that, in spite of her attempt to speak lightly, Sonia was really distressed. He hated more than ever the necessity that had driven him on the strange cruise ahead, but it seemed impossible to turn back now.

"It's not so bad as that, youngster," he said in what he meant to be a hearty and reassuring voice. "I'm to command the schooner *Sea Lass*. And, what's more, I know all about her. She used to belong to old man Herrick, and I sailed on her in the Bermuda race when she was first built, fifteen years ago. She's an able little two master, equipped with an auxiliary for harbor work; and, unless she's been knocked about too much, ought to be as good as she ever was. Herrick sold her long ago, and I suppose Gomez picked her up in some yard where she had been laid up for sale. Gomez says she still has her old fittings and I ought to live on her like a nabob.

"As to our destination, that's not quite so certain. But in any event we will put in at Port Limon, Costa Rica, and I'll send you a message from there, telling you all's well and the probable date of our return. Gomez is sending the schooner up the Sound from City Island tonight, under charge of the mate. She ought to be off here before daylight and we shall sail as soon as I can get aboard. Now run along and do your packing. I'll get Bill Hendricks to keep an eye on the house and to attend to hauling out your boat before rough weather sets in. Jump, now, my hearty!"

Sonia smiled back and went to her room. There, after some moments' thought, she got to work. It was a peculiar job of packing that she did. Into a steamer trunk went all of the things that a young woman would naturally take on a six weeks' visit to an aunt in Boston; but into a bag such as foremast hands and navy gobs use went a quite differently selected collection. An old gray skirt of heavy material, a lighter weight blue one; four middy blouses, two white and two blue; a heavy pair of rubber soled shoes, two pairs of heavy stockings, in addition to several more suited to warm weather and to display; two combs and military brushes for a bobbed haired girl; tooth brush and paste, a jar of cold cream, a box of face powder; an old reefer; three books . . . That about filled the bag for carrying purposes; but Sonia, after hesitating a moment, added some garments which didn't weigh anything to speak of and which had nothing seagoing about them.

When all was ready, Sonia did another odd thing. She lowered the sea bag carefully out of her window until it reposed among the shrubbery. Then she called her father to help her down with the trunk.

During the somewhat sketchy lunch that interrupted the preparations for departure, Sonia and her father kept to the usual themes of "Have you got this" and "Did you remember to—" appropriate to such times, and neither said nor did anything to suggest that the situation was out of the ordinary.

By five o'clock they had the house ready for closing up and Sonia's trunk was strapped on the rack at Patchy's battered stern, ready to go. If her father wondered a little at the light-heartedness of her farewell he was too busy to pursue the thought.

"A good, game girl," he said as Patchy sputtered up the hill and out of sight.

For half an hour Sonia drove steadily along the highway to New London. Then suddenly her hand signaled a right hand turn and she sent Patchy bouncing over the ruts of a dirt road that led in an entirely different direction.

FIFTEEN minutes of tough going and Sonia halted the old car in a valley among thick second growth woods, three miles away from the road to New London and Aunt Levanchia. She cut off the engine and settled back to think.

It wasn't her father nor her father's mysterious voyage that occupied her. She had those matters all settled to her own satisfaction. Mr. Robert Lowry had the stage.

Sonia reviewed that young man very completely. She was somewhat surprised and even a wee bit frightened to find how definitely he possessed her mind. At one and the same time she knew all about him and she knew nothing at all. At last she gave it up with a sigh.

"I suppose I'm in love," she admitted. The sigh was quite Victorian, but the boyish grin that accompanied the spoken admission was entirely 1928.

She considered motoring over to the farm where Robert—Bob—Robert—she tried it both ways to see which she liked best—was staying. She had a plot to unfold and Robert—yes, it would be Robert—would undoubtedly be interested. And, incidentally, when you were going away it was nice to have a chance to tell a young man who might want to know and perhaps he'd. . . Sonia blushed a most unmodern blush and stopped short. She knew now that she couldn't tell Robert. He'd be sure to spoil things and, anyway, much as she felt she could trust him, this business was her father's and it was a queer secret business that didn't bear much telling. Sonia frowned. Why, everything seemed to be getting queer and secret. Robert had a secret, her father was going on a secret voyage and Sonia herself . . . Well, there was that sea bag waiting in the shrubbery.

The thought of the bag strangely enough reminded Sonia of Aunt Levanchia who would be awaiting her in Boston. She mustn't have Aunt Levanchia worried. Presently, Patchy was back on the main road, and at the first village they came to Sonia paid a visit to the Western Union. That done, Patchy made calls at a stationer's shop and a delicatessen store. Dusk found the old car moving slowly along back roads in the direction of the shore and Cove Cottage. Sonia knew every byway in the country round about the cove, and even in the gathering dusk she had no difficulty in finding the entrance to an old wood road, a spot as secluded as though in the heart of a great forest. Actually it was not a quarter mile from Cove Cottage.

She backed Patchy in among the trees until the car was quite hidden from sight, and, gathering up the purchases she had made, walked through the woods to the edge of the beach.

Now, it was quite dark and Sonia decided that she could safely execute her next maneuver. She reentered the woods and kept in their shelter until she was exactly back of the cottage. Then, taking advantage of every bit of shrubbery that afforded shelter, she kept on until she was right under the window from which she had dropped her sea bag. There it was, safe. She gave a sigh of relief. The cottage was in darkness except for one light which she knew was in the library. Her father must be at work there, completing his preparations for departure. The night was getting chilly now and Sonia picked up her bag and stole back to the woods.

She made a wide circle around the house and came out again on the beach not far from the big rock. In its shelter she undid the bag, changed from her smart little traveling suit to the blue skirt and dark middy, and then ate her supper from the delicatessen store provisions. She would have liked a fire for company's sake but decided not to risk discovery. Presently she was absorbed in the no small task of writing a letter in the dark. She could not have told, had you asked her, why she had not written while she and Patchy were cruising about in the daylight; she had wanted to do her writing at the rock, and that was all there was to it.

When the note was finished—and it took a very long time for a rather short bit of composition—Sonia placed it in a crevice of the rock. Was the address legible, she wondered?

And now it was time, she knew, for her next move. Walking at the water's edge, where the soft sand of the beach muffled her steps, she approached the little wharf near the cottage, where the dory was tied. She got on board quietly and, making sure the oars were in the boat, cast off and drifted out into the cove. When she was far enough offshore to escape possible identification she shipped the oars and pulled alongshore to the neighborhood of the rock. There she landed, secured her bag and once more put off from shore.

THE schooner *Sea Lass* seemed to be in a hurry as she passed down the Sound from City Island. Although there was a fair breeze and enough of it nicely to fill her canvas, her auxiliary was at work, pushing her along.

Señor Gomez was on board; and Señor Gomez had an eye for a pretty girl. He didn't believe at all in the maxim about not mixing pleasure with business, and it had occurred to him that if he arrived early enough at Cove Cottage he might see Sonia Harbison and get a chance to continue the conversation which he had attempted over the telephone and which the arrival of his train for New York had cut short. He might even be able to persuade her father to take her on the schooner.

And so it was that Sonia had herself largely to thank for not having a too weary wait. In fact she had not been offshore in her dory more than twenty minutes when she sighted the lights of a sailing vessel heading in towards the cove and had to do a smart bit of rowing not to be too close when the schooner came to anchor.

Knowing that all eyes would be turned to shore she paddled in quietly towards the offshore side of the *Sea Lass,* and was near enough to see a boat put over and to know by the voices that Gomez and two other men—sailors, she supposed—had gone ashore in her.

The boat wasn't halfway to shore when a slim shape slid over the schooner's deck and melted into the shadow of the cabin while a dory drifted away down the Sound carried by tide and wind.

An hour later, the *Sea Lass,* under full sail, passed out through Fisher Island Sound and, close hauled, laid a course down the Atlantic coast calculated to keep clear of the regular ship lanes.

Next morning, having no definite errand to take him to Cove Cottage, Mr. Robert Lowry went there without one. He arrived by the short cut, whistling what he believed to be a tune.

Scarcely glancing at the land side of the house, he passed on to the end of the shoreward veranda, ready to greet the person he hoped would be there. The veranda was empty. It was, moreover, bare of all furniture except one chair rocking emptily in the strong breeze.

This was odd. The windows were shuttered tight and the door closed. Lowry inspected the rest of the house, now. All shut up. He knocked at the doors and tried them perfunctorily.

Then he set off uncertainly down the beach, turning once or twice to look again at the house. He told himself that the Harbisons had doubtless gone to town for the day; that his disappointment was making him imagine an air of desertion about the place. But each backward look renewed the first impression.

Well, here was a sign of life, at any rate: Barnum rushing up to him from one of his innumerable ports of call along the beach. He was, as usual, one of the busiest of dogs; but he circled sociably about Lowry and eventually decided to go along as far as the great rock. For it occurred to him that, there, he would be able to show just how a good bone, skilfully hidden, should be retrieved. He gave a fine performance, and Lowry, having suitably applauded him, sat down in the exact spot where he had sat with Sonia twenty-four hours before.

For several moments he remained motionless. Sonia's absence from her setting robbed it of warmth and reality; but the rock, having no doors and windows to daunt one by their blankness, seemed as welcoming as usual. Lowry leaned back. This was Sonia's own particular spot. She had told him so. He pulled out his pipe and lighted it thoughtfully.

Barnum continued to nose about, giving an occasional sandy sneeze, but not intruding on his companion's meditations until a new game presented itself. The game was to pretend that the little white envelope sticking out of a crevice of the rock was a rat, and to capture it at all costs. The scratching of Barnum's awkward claws made Lowry glance around. The letter fell almost into his hand. "*Mr. Robert Lowry,*" he read on the envelope.

He had never seen Sonia's handwriting, but he hadn't the slightest doubt that this was a sample of it and he tore the letter open eagerly.

"*Dear Robert Lowry,*" it began. That sounded a little odd: solemn. But he liked it. He read on quickly.

> *I have had to leave quite unexpectedly on a trip with father, and am sorry not to have seen you to say good-by. But it wasn't possible. I am going to ask you to attend to something for me. Patchy is hidden in the old lumber road in Semple's woods. Will you put her into the garage and not mind if I don't explain about it? We shall be back in about six weeks. I hope your work at the airplane plant goes well. And I do trust you.*
>
> *Sonia Harbison.*

Lowry was not only puzzled; he was really startled. For one thing, the writing had a queer, uneven look that he wouldn't have expected Sonia's to have. All sorts of possibilities loomed up, most of them unpleasant. For the hidden car he had no reasonable explanation unless Sonia had become involved in some escapade or other the night before. There was no way to tell how long ago the letter had been written, for it was in pencil.

Thinking back in search of a clue to what it all meant, Lowry felt that the answer must have some connection with the arrival of the foreign appearing man who had so inopportunely broken in on his talk with Sonia the previous day. It was following that visit that Harbison had been so obviously worried and had almost rudely cut short Lowry's visit at the cottage. He was certain that before the stranger's arrival Sonia had had no thought of leaving the cove; and now she was gone, leaving Patchy hidden in the woods and a note which quite evidently had been designed to give a minimum of information.

What was the man's name? . . . Now he had it—Gomez. And with remembrance of the name there flashed into Lowry's recollection the letter of introduction he had inadvertently read.

The first thing, then, was to find Gomez. No, not the first, because Patchy was waiting to be reclaimed. Lowry hurried along the beach and easily found the wood road and the car. He drove as rapidly as he dared back to the main road and so around to the cottage, where he put Patchy in the garage and shut the doors. There was no key.

While he was busy at this, Bill Hendricks the fisherman, who was following Harbison's orders to keep an eye on the place, appeared. Lowry explained that he had been using Miss Harbison's car and had received a note saying that she was suddenly called away. She had asked him to put the car in the cottage garage when he was through with it. The explanation satisfied the old man. Glad of someone to talk to and proud of his commission to look out for the Harbison belongings, he waxed so garrulous that Lowry became impatient. But in a moment he was all attention.

"Guess Mister Harbison decided to go on a v'yage," said Old Bill. "Long time since he's gone much o' anywheres, him that was oncet a powerful hand to go cruising. Last night late I see'd a schooner drop anchor, and I guess she come for Mister Harbison. Glad to know he can go sailin' again. Him and Miss Sonia lives pretty quiet here. But the time was when Mister Harbison had his own yacht —and more'n one, too. But rich or poor they's real folks and that Miss Sonia can outsail any o' the youngsters along this shore."

The old man would have gone on so long as he had a listener, but Lowry cut him short and, salving the offense with a bill that would keep the old man in tobacco for a year, started almost on a run up the path. Hendricks looked at the bill and then after the rapidly disappearing young man, amazement written all over his weather-beaten face.

TWENTY minutes later, Robert Lowry was bouncing over the roads in Al's taxi and urging that fearless driver to quite reckless speed in an effort to catch the New York express at New London. He made it, and once in the Grand Central Station, hurried to a telephone booth.

"Mister Johnson there?" he asked crisply of the voice that answered at the other end. "Tell him Lowry is on his way to the office. Good-by."

And presently the somewhat shabby young Mr. Lowry was being ushered into the sort of office where shabbiness never penetrates, and being ushered with every evidence of deference. When the door closed, he was facing an elderly man of distinguished appearance, the senior member, no less, of Johnson, Johnson & Johnson, possibly the most important law firm in the city.

"Hello, Bob," said Mr. Johnson pleasantly. "Glad you've come out of hiding. We were beginning to worry about you."

Lowry waved an impatient hand.

"I'm in trouble, John, and I need a lot of help and I need it right now."

The suave Mr. Johnson refused to be impressed.

"Airplane designing," he suggested, "is an uncertain business and expensive, but I've no doubt the estate can stand it. How many thousands do you want, or is it a big business matter?"

"Cut it."

When his client descended to slang, Mr.

ohnson knew that it was time to be erious.

"Sorry, Bob," he said gravely. "Go on with your story."

"I'm in love," said Bob slowly. "In love with a girl who doesn't know who or what I am, and who probably either thinks I'm making mysteries for the sake of making them or that there's something queer about me. I didn't even dare tell her my name—used the first part of it. I'm Robert Lowry, who does something about airplanes, and is such a poor specimen that he can't even be frank with the girl he's in love with."

The young man had been gaining speed and power as he went along, and Mr. Johnson merely raised a protesting hand as Robert swept on.

"That fool will would make a saint swear. Here I've dodged girls ever since I was out of college, for fear I might fall in love with someone who knew me. And now, when I've found the loveliest girl on this planet, I have to go on making a mystery of myself. And—" Bob checked himself in full stride. "But all this is not the point," he went on more slowly. "Miss Harbison has disappeared, gone I don't know where, with her father and a man named Gomez, I suspect. Here's what I want to find out and I want the quickest action this old office ever turned out."

Mr. Johnson listened intently and made a note or two while Lowry told of the letter from Hill introducing Harbison to Gomez.

"We can trace Harbison through Gomez, I believe," Lowry concluded, "and then I can find Sonia. You may say there's nothing to worry about. Well, I've a lively hunch that there's something wrong about the whole business and I won't be easy until I know just where Miss Sonia Harbison is. And when I do I'm going to kick this silly affair of the will higher than a kite."

Mr. Johnson gave the soft answer that is supposed to turn away wrath and, what was vastly more important, made a promise to set every agency at his command at work to trace the Harbisons. With that assurance, Lowry left, only to pop back in again to warn Mr. Johnson that all inquiries must be made quietly.

"I don't know what Harbison and Gomez are up to, or why I suspect they are up to anything," he said. "But I don't want to run the least danger of making trouble for Sonia's father. You know how to do these things. I'll be sitting by the telephone in my apartment, from now on, and the less time I have to sit the better I'll be pleased."

And directly on Mr. Lowry's departure things began to happen in widely different quarters of the town. A nationally famous politican held a long telephone talk with another in Washington; a great banking house made certain inquiries which had nothing to do with banking; and the head of the most private of private detective agencies bestirred himself as he had not done since he won his spurs.

Mr. Lowry, sitting in his perfectly appointed apartment in the East Seventies, waited impatiently for a telephone call. It didn't come. Instead Mr. John Johnson, of Johnson, Johnson & Johnson, appeared in person a little after seven o'clock. He looked grave.

"Here is what you asked for," he began without preliminary. "Gomez was introduced to Harbison as Juan Gomez, former attaché of the Colombian Legation. Elton Hill, who gave Harbison the note of introduction, believed that it was Juan Gomez whom he was addressing. He still thinks so; but he is wrong. The man is Ferdinandez Gomez, the younger brother of Juan, to whom, I am told, he bears the most striking resemblance. The brothers quarreled several years ago and Juan, who is now in Washington on a business mission, knows nothing about his brother.

"Ferdinandez is the black sheep of the family. He has been living in New York for the past five years and has always had plenty of money—from what source is not known. Recently he purchased the former yacht, *Sea Lass,* a two masted schooner, a full description of which you will find in these papers. He has taken her, ostensibly, on a pleasure cruise to the Caribbean. Harbison secured the introduction from Hill after observing Gomez and another Latin-American in conversation with Hill on the street. He told Hill he would like to consult Gomez about an oil concession in Colombia. Mr. Harbison has no interests in Colombia.

"The *Sea Lass* sailed out through the Sound last night, leaving City Island before dark. Her clearance papers show that Harbison is the master. Harbison was once a very rich man. He married a Russian, daughter of a former counselor of the Russian Legation. That was before the War. His fortune was invested in Russian Government securities and was wiped out by the Revolution. Harbison was once an internationally known yachtsman. After the loss of his fortune he retired entirely from social life and has lived quietly with his daughter, his only child, in a cottage on the north shore of Long Island Sound—but you know all about that. The *Sea Lass* is now at sea, presumably bound for Port Limon in Costa Rica. Harbison is undoubtedly aboard; but whether your young lady is or not, I can't say."

Mr. Johnson paused and drew a long breath, but Lowry did not interrupt. Presently the lawyer went on:

"That much we know. My informant suspects—though there is no actual proof—that Gomez is bound on some venture that will not bear close inspection. His selection of Harbison to command the schooner is a curious one; although it would seem that Harbison sought him rather than he, Harbison. The mate of the *Sea Lass* is a shady character who only recently finished a jail sentence for an attempt to smuggle in aliens. He has also been connected with the drug smuggling line; but there is no evidence to identify Gomez with any of the drug or booze rings.

"The crew, six seamen and a cook, I know nothing about except that they appear, by report from City Island, to be two Latin-Americans and four "squareheads," which, in sailor lingo, means almost any breed of North European. It is no savory mess that Harbison is mixed up with; but that's the worst I know about it. As to why Harbison associated himself with Gomez I can only assume that, as he was unusually hard up, he sought to earn money the only way he knew—on the water. His own character assays one hundred per cent. If he's in with a bad gang, I feel sure he doesn't know it."

WHEN Johnson had finished his report, Lowry sat quiet for a moment. He paid no attention to the lawyer's closing comment. Sonia was on the *Sea Lass*. He did not need to look at her letter; he knew it by heart, and the phrase "have had to leave quite unexpectedly on a trip with father" could mean only that she was at that moment sailing down the coast. He didn't even stop to wonder how Harbison could have allowed his daughter to accompany him. His mind was working fast and had no time for unessentials. "Sonia—*Sea Lass*—Port Limon." Those were the only things necessary to remember. He must catch the *Sea Lass* at the Costan Rican port, must find some way to get on board. If there was any deviltry afoot, it seemed obvious that nothing might be expected to happen until the schooner had reached Central America and Gomez had accomplished the first part of his mission, whatever it was.

"How do you get to Port Limon?" he shot at Johnson, who had sat observing him.

The lawyer thought a moment.

"United Fruit boat via Havana," he said. "May be other ways but that's the only one I know."

"Sailings?" demanded Lowry. "No, no, I mean from Havana," he added as he saw Johnson turning to the ship news section of the *Times*.

The lawyer stared, but relinquished the paper for the telephone.

"Sorry to disturb you at dinner, Gordon," he said a moment later, "but a client of mine wants to know when the next sailing is from Havana to Port Limon . . . Yes, I'll hold the wire."

In the brief interval, Lowry spoke quickly.

"If there's a sailing within twenty-four hours engage a passage for me."

Mr. Johnson stared at him in amazement.

"How do you expect to be in Havana in twenty-four——"

"Never mind that. Get me the passage," Lowry interrupted, and at the same instant the steamship official was back on the wire to say that the *Pastores* was leaving Havana for Port Limon at four o'clock Thursday afternoon.

"Get the passage," whispered Lowry, and it was arranged.

When Lowry had finished making a note of the hour of sailing, the pier at which the *Pastores* was docked and like details, the older man, rising to go, dropped his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I've only a guess as to what you intend doing," he said, "and it's not strictly my business, but don't be rash, Bob. I was your father's friend as I am yours, and if I have no responsibility in this matter as your lawyer I have as your friend."

He was answered with a flash of the most engaging smile that belonged to Robert Lowry, a smile that had been notably missing since early morning. Yet it faded quickly and it was new and somewhat tense Mr. Lowry who answered.

"Thank you, John," he said. "Thank you for doing for me what no other man in town could have done—and without asking questions. But I've spent most of my life not being rash, spent it mostly in trying to live acording to another man's rules. Now, I'm going to be myself. There is something I want more than I have ever wanted anything in this world. I mean to get it."

Johnson felt a responsive thrill. It was great to be twenty-five and in love. He made no further protest, but there was an unusual warmth in his handshake as he bade Lowry good-by and good luck.

The door had hardly closed behind Johnson when Lowry was at the telephone. The call he put through roused from reverie a young man who had been sitting on a bench outside a large shedlike building on the shore of Great South Bay, watching Fire Island Light send its warning beam across the converging steamship lanes that lead to New York.

"Hello," he said. "Yes, this is Mike." And then as he recognized the urgent voice at the other end, "All right, boss, I'm listening." And then, "But, good gosh, what's the hurry? . . . Cuba! You're crazy, boss . . . Oh, all right . . . Yes, the tanks are almost full. I'll get busy. Good-by."

A few minutes later Michael Doherty was the busiest mechanic then in existence, grooming the huge seaplane that stood on the ways beneath the shed. Forty miles away, Robert Lowry was settling himself behind the wheel of a low hung, powerful roadster which was related to Patchy in the same way that the Twentieth Century is related to De Witt Clinton's first wood burner. And watching Robert Lowry just then, you'd have put a bet on him to be cool headed as well as quick in action. Impatient as he was, he eased in his clutch and drove with the care that makes the surest speed through town traffic. Only when he was across the great bridge which spans the East River above Welfare Island did he let the car show its speed.

The roads beyond Long Island City were mercifully free from traffic, and the speedometer mounted steadily as the great, graceful car seemed to flow along. Young Mr. Doherty had scarcely finished his preliminary attentions to the seaplane and gotten the engine turning over when Lowry's car bounded down the side road and skidded to a stop in the sand outside the shed. Fifteen minutes later he was dressed in flying togs, had stored a suitcase in the cockpit and was ready to start the plane which was by that time bobbing easily on the little waves of the bay.

Mike looked at him.

"Don't I go along, boss?" he asked anxiously. "Don't know where you're up to but it looks like it might be interesting. And I'm fed up on this beach."

Lowry hesitated a moment.

"Look here, Mike," he said. "You know as well as I do that there's a certain amount of risk starting out in a hurry like this, and at night, for a flight downcoast. I want to reach Havana in time to catch a boat that is sailing Thursday afternoon at four. This is still Wednesday—" he looked at his watch—"and it's now two minutes after eleven. That gives me seventeen hours, less the minutes, to catch that boat. I've got to drive her like blazes and take chances. Still want to come?"

For answer Mike threw overboard the killick of the sharpie in which he had rowed Lowry to the seaplane, and scrambled into the after cockpit.

"Sounds fine to me," he said. "And you couldn't get along without me, anyway. Maybe you think you're Lindbergh, but I'll come in handy as relief pilot, and who'd you think was going to take care of this baby when you leave her at Havana? Think I'd let some furriner play with her? Not on your life!"

That was that, and of course Lowry knew that he'd have to tie Mike to leave him behind. The seaplane taxied out over the bay, gathered speed and, with the hum of a giant bee, lifted into the air and sped out to sea. She had the wind on her tail and was running down her latitude at ninety miles an hour, so that long before daybreak she had passed unknowingly beyond the *Sea Lass*, winged out before the favoring breeze and logging all of ten knots.

ALL was not well on the *Sea Lass*. That able little schooner hadn't cleared Montauk Point and laid her course to the southward before Harbison discovered that Hansen, the mate, was more longshore bully than sailor and that the crew was nothing to brag about. The only satisfactory things were the schooner and the fair wind that enabled them to hold their course. The *Sea Lass* was much as Harbison remembered her. The one time glory of her luxurious cabin furnishings was dimmed and much of her brass-work had been painted over to save work, but she steered like a witch and footed it along as smartly as ever.

Gomez retired very early, but Harbison kept the deck until the schooner was well clear of the land and of the steamer lanes converging on Ambrose Channel. Then he turned in, leaving word that he was to be summoned if the wind changed or increased materially. He was uneasy; for he didn't trust Hansen even in the light airs that were wafting the *Sea Lass* along. But, anyway, it was good to be at sea again and Harbison, disgusted with his nervousness, called himself an old woman.

He slept soundly until he was called by San Loo, the steward, a Chinese boy who made up in pleasant smiles what he lacked in English. He knew his job, too, for he had a cup of coffee ready when Harbison had pulled on his clothes, and it was good coffee. Harbison gave the boy an answering smile, asked and learned his name, and then went on deck.

His quick look found the schooner still running easily before the freshening breeze, under full sail, and a glance in the binnacle told him she was on her course. After a perfunctory word, Hansen went below to his quarters and Harbison was left alone on the little quarter deck, save for the man at the wheel, a stolid looking sailor who appeared to be a fair helmsman.

Harbison, having had a long look through his glasses at the rather rare sight of a big square-rigger coming up close hauled from the eastward, turned to speak to the helmsman, when he saw something that nearly caused him to drop the binoculars on the deck. There, leaning easily against the rail, was Sonia, regarding him with smiling eyes. Harbison gave a quick look at the man at the wheel. That worthy, his eye traveling from compass to the luff of the mainsail, was tending strictly to business and had apparently not noticed Harbison's consternation.

Harbison drew Sonia out of earshot of the man, his grip on her arm unintentionally painful.

"Sonia, what does this mean?" he demanded.

"Stowaway, father," she answered lightly. "You didn't really think I was going to let you off adventuring and leave me behind?"

Her smile should have softened a harder heart than Harbison's, but it found no response.

"It was a mad thing to do," he said severely. "This isn't exactly a pleasure cruise. I explained to you why I was making this voyage and you knew I'd have taken you if I'd thought it possible. I'd give every cent of what I'll make to have you safe ashore."

Sonia had not expected to have her father take her presence so hard. Her own plan and its execution had been undertaken without any second thoughts. Now that she saw how thoroughly her father was disturbed, her quick mind took up the situation from his viewpoint and she was genuinely contrite. She made her peace as best she might and had coaxed a smile back to Harbison's face when it vanished at the thought of Gomez. He remembered his employer's interest in Sonia. Why, Gomez himself had suggested that Sonia come on the voyage, and he had considered the suggestion an impertinence. How explain her presence now?

"Let me do the explaining," Sonia suggested easily, and then with a half concealed start recalled something she had not thought of until now, since it happened—the telephone message from Gomez that her father did not know about. It had been, to be sure, merely a word of thanks for her service in showing him the way to the house, a regret that he had left too suddenly to offer her his compliments again in farewell, and there the connection had been broken. What more had Gomez meant to say, she now thought apprehensively. He might interpret her presence as the result of his attentions to her.

Before her father could speak again, Gomez himself appeared at the top of the companionway stairs. She summoned all her self-possession.

"Good morning, Señor Gomez," said nia, quite as though they had parted the evious evening with every expectation of eeting at breakfast.

Gomez, very smart in a well cut double-easted blue coat and white flannels, owed little of the surprise he probably lt; but he made no effort to conceal his easure.

"Ah, the Señorita Harbison," he exained. "Delighted that you decide to in us. The ship is yours, señorita."

He asked no questions and Sonia was ally grateful to him for the ease with hich he met the situation. And so, when little later they sat down to breakfast in e pleasant saloon of the schooner, she was acious, if a little guardedly so. She gan to be rather pleased with herself. nder her smiles Gomez expanded visibly; d as for San Loo, he was her slave from e first moment.

Followed long uneventful days as the *a Lass* ran down the coast before favorg winds or zigzagged back and forth at e edge of the Gulf Stream when the wind as ahead. Harbison found a sure cure r anxiety in the never ending round of ties and an honest joy in being busy out the thing he knew best. As for omez, he proved himself the perfect host; d if his gallantry towards Sonia was rsistent, his lovemaking was not of the o obvious kind.

He told Sonia tales of jungle expeditions search of oil in Nicaragua, of revolutions at bloomed in a night in the cafés and rished in the fierce sun of broad day ith a rattle of machine guns and the rish of machetes. Gradually he built up picture of himself as a patriot who evoted his time and money to the polical betterment of his adopted country. onia found herself almost liking him. is mission, as he presented it in somehat hazy outlines—the rescue of a leader f the people who, forced to flee for a me from Nicaragua, had made his way Costa Rica to await the arrival of the *a Lass*—sounded romantic enough.

But while she listened and smiled on e señor, Sonia's thoughts were always raying to a young man in worn eeds, who understood engines and dogs d— well, a most understanding young an. At such times Sonia felt very nely.

MEANWHILE the subject of her thoughts had done several somewhat startling things. He had reached Havana harbor just in time to see the *Pastores* steaming out; had, after three tries, succeeded in dropping a message on her deck which halted her engines while the great seaplane swept down in a graceful curve to the vessel's lee and the few passengers got the thrill of their trip. They were anxious to see the aviator, but after coming on board and having a talk with the captain, he kept to his stateroom. The *Pastores* docked at Port Limon very early one morning, and only one or two people saw Lowry when he went ashore. There he had a talk with an official of the United Fruit Company—and disappeared.

On the flight to Havana he had laid his plans as far ahead as he could. While waiting for the *Pastores'* boat to pick him up he had told Mike to take the plane to Key West to await instructions, and had penciled a note for the mechanic to deliver to Johnson in case he hadn't further word in thirty days. Lowry meant to scout about Port Limon, pick up any information about Gomez and the visit of the *Sea Lass* he could, and to stand by in case of need. At least, he would be near Sonia and able to get in touch with her. He had about ten days to wait, he figured, and much might be learned in ten days.

So Robert Lowry disappeared, in so far as polite society was concerned. But there presently appeared in a wharfside café a young man who looked to be of that sad species, beachcomber; a tropical tramp, unshaven, unwashed; a picker-up of odd jobs and odd companions; a person of unquenchable thirst and some ingenuity in slaking it. At the end of a week he had found out more than he had hoped. He knew that Juan, the café proprietor, conducted a clearing house for all the evil on that coast and that Juan was excited over new possibilities.

Drug smuggling from Mexico to the United States was becoming overrisky and a bright mind had conceived the idea of shipping a big consignment of opium derivatives out of the entirely respectable harbor of Port Limon. He even caught a glimpse of the big gun among the smugglers, a crafty eyed elderly man whose name purported to be Masaya, although the café habitués usually spoke of him as "the General" or sometimes in more sardonic humor as "the Patriot."

When Lowry got that far he would have profited greatly by a few minutes' talk with Sonia's father. Between them they could have pieced out Gomez's scheme nicely. As it was, he had only part of the story. He guessed enough of the rest to surmise that the coming of the *Sea Lass* was closely connected with the plans of the drug smugglers and to feel all the more uneasy about Sonia. It would have been easy enough to lay his information before the Costa Rican authorities and have the schooner under observation when she arrived; but that would involve Sonia's father.

"Guess I'll have to go it alone," said young Mr. Lowry to himself as he pretended to drink another gin and bitters.

Ten days can do a lot for a beard, even when, as in the case of Robert Lowry, it is a somewhat sandy one. And ten days properly misspent can give tropical clothes the appearance of having seen as many years of wear. Given such beard and clothes, plus a shambling gait and a general air of shiftlessness, a young man, intent upon the purpose, might well escape recognition by his closest friends. Gomez had had only a passing look at Robert Lowry, so that young man felt confident he could, if necessary, pass any scrutiny by the former. Harbison, too, he believed, would not penetrate his disguise; since the last man he would expect to see in Port Limon would be Sonia's erstwhile acquaintance. Of Sonia herself he didn't feel too sure; perhaps moved to that attitude by the certainty that he would know Sonia in any guise and anywhere.

But as the day arrived when the *Sea Lass* might be expected, he made up his mind that, while he would most certainly try to ~~see~~ Sonia, he would try just as hard not to let her see him.

It was on the eleventh day after his arrival in Port Limon that Lowry saw the schooner sail gracefully into the lee of the protecting island and anchor to await the quarantine launch. The doctor's visit was short, and Lowry was glad to know that so far as physical health went, all was well on board. He lounged about the waterfront waiting impatiently for a boat to put off and straining his eyes for a glimpse of Sonia, although the anchorage of the schooner was too far out to make that p
sible.

Presently he did sight a boat pulling
from the direction of the *Sea Lass*,
he hurried back to Juan's café. If
was right in his surmises it would not
long before some of the people from
schooner would arrive there to enjoy Ju
dubious hospitality. He had, or appea
to have, several drinks in rapid successi
and then to all appearances went to sl
with his head on a table.

The regular habitués of the place ca
and went, but no one else for a long ti
and Lowry was beginning to think he
playing possum in vain when, peeri
from beneath his arms, he saw Gomez en
and Juan bustle forward to receive hi
The pair went at once to Juan's quarte
entering by a back door of the bar;
two men, sailors who had accompai
Gomez, sat down at a table near Low
For some time they limited their conver
tion to the necessity of ordering drinks.
these began to be effective one of them
gan to talk loudly enough for the other
utter a word of warning. Lowry caught
name "Hansen," which he recognized
that of the mate of the *Sea Lass*,
understood that the younger of the two
advising the other to stay sober lest
feel the weight of Hansen's fist. The ol
man's reply was picturesquely unprintal
but it conveyed the idea that the spea
was entirely fed up on Hansen and wo
jump the ship were it not that Port Lin
was a poor place to pick up another be

As Lowry was turning a hastily forn
plan over in his mind, Gomez reappea
He ordered the seamen to return at o
to the schooner and to tell Captain H
bison to send a boat for him at sundo
As soon as the men had left, Gomez
turned to the back room and Lowry hur
from the café. He overhauled the
sailors, in his rôle of perpetual souse,
reeling against the older man clung to
to steady himself.

"Please to meet shipmate," he
thickly. "Wha' 'bout li'l drink?"

Without waiting for reply he displa
a roll of bills that made the two stare.
greed in their eyes was quite satisfact
Five minutes later the three "shipmat
were holding down a table at a café
far away from Juan's as possible. As t
drank, Lowry managed to convey the

mation that a steamship bound for lon was sailing that afternoon. Larsen, elder of the two sailors, had once been the Navy. The name Colon was music his ears. He knew his way about there d Lowry surmised that he had intellice enough to guess that deck passage uld be obtainable on the steamship sailg that afternoon.

And so Lowry appeared to pass very pidly from the inebriation of good fellowip to the sound sleep of the unjust, his ad again on the table, the roll of bills otruding temptingly from a pocket. A ile later he was alone, and at sunset— rather some time thereafter—Señor mez was forced to take a shore boat off the *Sea Lass*. Lowry had fished for e of the crew of the *Sea Lass* and caught o, his sailor friends having reasoned th perfect logic that such a chance for y money came only once in a lifetime.

SO IT came about that, next day, the mate of the *Sea Lass* was ashore looking for a hand or two to supply e gap in the crew. Hansen knew that he uldn't be choosy, and when a longshore mp turned up in Juan's café who said was an A. B., Hansen snapped him up thout asking questions, and Robert wry shortly found himself on board the *Lass*. He had signed the shipping pers at the American consul's office and had, at the moment, no need of direct ntact with Captain Harbison. With the *Lass* at anchor only a chance job would him to the after part of the schooner d he hoped to avoid meeting Sonia until could make his own opportunity to see r alone. The crew accepted him without estion and he turned into his bunk with eeling that much had been accomplished.

When the crew turned to next morning wash down the decks, Lowry, working r the skylight of the cabin, caught the ooth flow of Gomez's slightly Latin vored English and listened as he rubbed. He made out that Gomez was ging Harbison and Sonia to take a run hore. Lowry pieced bits of the talk tother and deduced that Gomez had said t their expected passenger was delayed d that there would be plenty of time for rbison and his daughter to ride up to n José. He was convincingly eloquent out the scenic beauties of the trip and succeeded in exciting Sonia's interest, until Harbison, with obvious reluctance, agreed to go.

At that, Lowry, who had made an excellent beginning at scrubbing a hole in the deck at the particular spot of his labors, attracted the unfavorable attention of the mate who made some pointed remarks about his industry. He was forced to move on before he could learn whether or not Gomez meant to accompany the Harbisons.

He was relieved then, when, an hour later, he saw Sonia and her father go ashore in the launch. Hansen went in command of it, accompanied by one of the crew. Apparently he wasn't taking chances on further desertions.

Lowry felt repaid for the past week and more of evil living as he again saw the cause of his presence on the *Sea Lass*. Sonia was more lovely than ever, he thought, as he watched her slim gracefulness. He caught a glimpse of dimples and gray eyes under the sun hat and saw again the wonder of her smile as she bade a gracious good-by to Gomez. That gentleman's somewhat oversolicitous gallantry brought nothing like a smile to Lowry's face. Quite the contrary.

The day passed without event, but as soon as it was dark things began to happen on board the *Sea Lass*. The crew were ordered to get up anchor and it was made plain to them that noise was not desired. The tide was running out, the light breeze was offshore, and the schooner drifted rapidly through the passage between the shore and the island. She was without lights. Once out of hearing from the land, sail was made and the *Sea Lass,* after standing offshore a few miles, was brought on a course parallel to the coast. An hour's sailing and the schooner began a series of short tacks which brought her close inshore.

Suddenly Lowry, who was standing by the mainsheet, was aware that there was a new figure on the quarter deck. He couldn't at first be certain in the darkness, which was relieved only by the slight phosphorescence of the sea; but presently he made sure that the stranger was the Patriot.

However he got on board, it was easy to see he knew his islands, for under his pilotage the *Sea Lass* negotiated a narrow passage and came to anchor in a perfectly protected miniature harbor. A red light, waved from her after deck, brought instant response from shore, and hardly was the anchor down when a boat was alongside and Lowry and the rest of the crew were busy taking on board a seemingly endless number of matting covered cases not unlike those in which tea is sometimes shipped. These were carried below decks and stowed on top of the ballast in the hold of the *Sea Lass.*

It was fast, hot work in that cramped space, but in an hour the last of the cases had been stowed, every trace of the taking on of cargo swept up and thrown overboard and the *Sea Lass* was once more headed out to sea. And long before daylight she was back at her anchorage looking as innocent as white paint. The Patriot was not to be seen. Lowry thought he might have gone ashore with the boat that brought off the cases of opium, but he was not certain.

If Masaya had gone ashore it was evident that no one else was to have that liberty. Hansen or Gomez were always on deck through that day and the following night, each with a suspicious bulge in his right hand coat pocket, and whichever one had the deck watched the crew like a hawk.

Lowry had plenty of time to think. He was relieved on one point. Evidently Sonia's father knew nothing about the opium and so had been gotten out of the way while the cargo was smuggled on board. Evidently, too, the crew could be kept from leaking information by being closely guarded on board until the schooner sailed. But what about the other end of the trip? Lowry decided that being a member of the crew of the *Sea Lass* was not at present a good insurance risk. He was unarmed—his rather scant costume offered no hiding place for a revolver—and he thought he could foresee the time when some form of Colonel Colt's equality maker would be most useful.

The puzzle as to how Harbison had gotten mixed up in Gomez's schemes remined to be solved, but since it seemed certain that he was not in the drug smuggling plot Lowry determined to avail himself of any chance to get on shore and tell his story to the American consul.

The watchfulness of Gomez and Hansen made that impossible during the daylight hours, and shortly after nightfall Sonia and
her father returned to the schooner. T
descended at once to the cabin, and
Lowry, Sonia was only a voice and a
of white in the tropic starlight.

If he was to get word ashore, it
now or never. The schooner's ancho
was a scant half mile from the pier
Lowry knew he could easily swim the
tance. There might be sharks, prob
were, but he had read that they seld
attack a swimmer. He was about to
over the side and chance it when
thought struck him that the schooner mi
sail before he could swim the distance
get the authorities into action. There
he knew, no craft in the port fit to pu
the schooner once she was offshore, and
what he feared should happen he would
powerless to aid Sonia or her father in
event that trouble arose on the *Sea L*

As he hesitated, the mate came forw
and the opportunity was gone for the t
being. Nor did he get another chance
slipping overside. He cursed his hesitat
when an hour later the schooner still sw
at her anchor. He saw Gomez in d
conference with Harbison and was puzz
and disturbed when a few moments later,
a boat slipped through the shadows a
landed the Patriot at the companion ladd
he saw Harbison greet him with ev
evidence of respect. Masaya, muffled
a cloak and with his features hidden
a low drawn hat, looked quite the p
of the king escaping in disguise, as play
in ancient melodramas. But Lowry did
get the significance of the act. The Sp
ard went below at once. Then the S
Lass began to repeat her maneuvers
the previous night. Only this time, wh
once safely offshore, she set her runn
lights.

ONCE at sea, Lowry had two prob
to consider: how to keep from h
recognized by Sonia
into the confidence of the
that if possible it was be
until real trouble was
voyage home passed uneventfully,
well and good. Then Sonia's father w
be paid off and leave the schooner wit
ever knowing that he had been instru
tal in helping to smuggle in the evil c
that lay above the ballast in the h
It would be time enough then for Lo
to decide what was the responsibility

his own knowledge. Back of his eagerness to get closely into the forecastle councils was his feeling that Gomez either had reason to trust the men forward or that he must plan to prevent the possibility of the story of the *Sea Lass's* real mission leaking out at that end.

If the former supposition was correct, then Lowry alone was in possible danger. The two deserters both belonged in Johnson's classification of "squareheads." There remained, in addition to Lowry, the Chinese boy who berthed aft and with whom the crew had little contact; the cook, a middle aged negro; and the four foremast hands. Of these latter, Erickson was a taciturn Swede, Juarez, an apparently light hearted Mexican, Swansen another Scandinavian, and José an almost diminutive Latin of some sort. Lowry noticed almost at once that the mate, Hansen, bullied the Scandinavians more than he did the Mexicans and that José in particular escaped both the mate's fist and tongue. He therefore suspected that José was the underground telegraph that kept the mate informed as to what went on forward. Perhaps the others of the crew knew it, too, or perhaps they were too used to queer happenings to have thought or cared much about the cargo taken on board at night.

In any event, Lowry listened in vain for any talk about the opium. All he gathered was that the *Sea Lass* offered a pleasanter berth than these men were accustomed to and that they would have been quite content were it not for the continual nagging of the mate. This went on as a rule when Captain Harbison was not on deck. He learned that the crew respected Harbison's seamanship, but were puzzled by his manner and ways which were not at all those of the usual sailing master.

The *Sea Lass* made a quick run across the Caribbean and passed around the western end of Cuba and through the Florida Straits without anything happening, apparently, to mar the peacefulness of the little world on board. The schooner was rolling north with the Gulf Stream and was off the South Carolina coast when the first of the accidents happened. Erickson fell from the foremast and was so badly hurt that he died next day and was buried at sea, Captain Harbison reading the service and Sonia standing near him, more beautiful than ever, Lowry thought, with her face grown grave and pitying over this first experience with violent death.

Swansen, who went aloft to finish the job which had engaged Erickson when the latter fell, came below later shaking his head and mumbling to himself. Lowry gathered that the sailor had, before replacing it, examined the rope whose parting had caused Erickson's fall, and was not pleased with what he had found. Lowry questioned him directly, after looking about the forecastle to make sure they were not overheard. Swansen said that the rope appeared to have been cut partly through and not to have been worn through by natural friction. A shadow down the companionway caused them to look up in time to see the dark face of José vanish from sight.

Swansen's surmise troubled Lowry greatly. Were Gomez and Hansen, he wondered, beginning the process of getting rid of such members of the crew as might turn informer? Going back in his mind to the night when the opium was loaded, Lowry realized that he could not be certain whether or not the cook and the Chinese boy had been on board. Certainly they had not turned to with the loading. If they were ignorant of the *Sea Lass's* cargo or were in Gomez's confidence, it was possible that, as the schooner neared port, Hansen would find means to dispose of the remaining Scandinavian and Lowry. José would be left, and probably the other Mexican. These, with the Chinese boy and the cook, would be sufficient to handle the schooner, particularly as both Gomez and the passenger could at least put their weight on a rope, although the latter had seldom appeared on deck since the *Sea Lass* left Port Limon. He was understood to be far from well.

Lowry thought of explaining the position as he saw it to Swansen, but decided that there would be no further action until the *Sea Lass* was further north. He had cause almost at once to regret his silence.

The wind had freshened in the early evening of the day on which Erickson had gone to his last resting place in the sea, and the *Sea Lass*, close-hauled, was driving steadily up the coast. During Lowry's trick at the wheel Sonia had come on deck. Hansen was forward, giving some instructions to Juarez, and for a few moments

Sonia was alone on the quarter deck. It was almost dark, and she was only an indistinct figure near the rail, but Lowry felt her presence and longed to speak to her. He believed he could rely on her self-command not to cry out if he revealed himself, but since there would be little time for explanations he did not want to alarm her by a veiled warning. As he hesitated, Gomez came on deck and the opportunity was gone.

Gomez joined Sonia by the rail and began conversing in so low a tone that Lowry caught only fragments of what he was saying. Those indicated that Gomez was attempting to make the talk very personal, while Sonia was skilfully parrying. He heard her ask about the dead seaman and noted that Gomez had the cleverness to be very sympathetic. Sonia, however, soon excused herself and went below. Gomez took a turn about the deck. He was humming a tune and seemed much pleased with himself.

Swansen relieved the wheel at midnight. Lowry had scarcely thrown himself down on his bunk before he heard a cry that brought him to his feet and to the foot of the forecastle ladder in a jump. He scrambled on deck to find sails slatting and the booms thrashing across the deck as the schooner came up into the wind. The deck seemed deserted. Running aft, Lowry found Swansen slumped down by the wheel, groaning but apparently unconscious.

Lowry was forced to give his first attention to the schooner which was pitching violently in the short seas. The main boom, bringing up with a snap as the great sail slatted back, threatened to bring down the mast. Lowry put the wheel hard up and after a moment the *Sea Lass* paid off. He was struggling with the wheel when he was grasped from behind and his hands torn from the spokes. Something crashed down on his head with stunning force.

WHEN he regained consciousness Captain Harbison and Hansen were bending over him. José had the wheel. Apparently, Lowry had been out only a few seconds, and the water dripping from his head as he struggled to sit up explained how they had brought him to.

"What the devil goes on here?" Harbison was demanding, dividing his attention between the condition of the schooner in the rapidly rising wind and the scene which had confronted him as he reached the deck.

For answer, Hansen pointed to Swansen's body, which lay just beside Lowry, and bending swiftly, picked up a long bladed knife and handed it to the captain.

"Murder. That's what's up," he growled. "This beachcombing bum we picked up at Limon has knifed Swansen."

And before Lowry could gather his benumbed wits to protest, the mate recounted rapidly how he had stepped into the galley for a cup of coffee, leaving Swansen at the wheel. He had been off the deck only a moment when he heard a cry and rushed out to find Swansen lying on the deck with Lowry bending over him; he had knocked Lowry out when the sailor came at him with the same knife that had done for poor Swansen.

Lowry's head was clearing slowly. He tried to get to his feet as he cried out:

"It's a lie. I wasn't on deck. I was in the forecastle when——"

Harbison cut his protest short.

"That will do, my man."

He looked tense and angry; but Lowry, now in full command of his senses, noted with relief that the captain's alert glance was taking in every element of the situation and that he was not satisfied with the mate's glib explanation.

By that time, the cook and Juarez had joined the group by the wheel. The cook corroborated Hansen's story of being in the galley when Swansen cried out. Juarez said that he had been asleep in the forecastle, which Lowry knew to be true. It did not seem to occur to anyone to account for José, who stood steadily at the wheel and said nothing. Harbison made no comment. After a brief examination of Swansen's body, which told him that the sailor had died of a stab wound inflicted from behind, the captain of the *Sea Lass* stood slightly to one side, listening to the excited chatter of the cook and the eager alibi of Juarez.

After his first indignant and instinctive outburst Lowry kept silent. This was not the time to appeal to Harbison or to attempt to warn him. If he revealed himself and convinced Harbison of his identity, Lowry knew that the final battle would be fought right there on the deck, with Hansen, José, and probably Juarez and the cook ranged against himself and the captain, and with Gomez and the Patriot, below, for reinforcements. Lowry found time to wonder why Gomez had remained below. The circumstance worried him. As he stood confronting his accusers he was greatly relieved to hear Sonia's voice, anxious but not excited, calling to her father. Harbison answered quietly but commandingly, telling the girl to stay below, that there had been an accident. Sonia had partly emerged from the companionway and glanced swiftly about the deck. She hesitated, but when Harbison repeated his order she turned and disappeared.

As soon as she went, Harbison snapped out:

"Put this man in irons and lock him up in the stateroom next to mine."

Hansen was ready enough to snap on the handcuffs, but he protested at placing the prisoner in the cabin.

"I'll chain him to a stanchion in the forecastle. He'll be safe enough there," he blustered and was pushing Lowry forward when Harbison cut him short.

"You seem to forget that I am in command of this schooner, Mister Mate," he said coldly. "Obey my order and put this man in the vacant stateroom next to mine."

The mate hesitated a moment and then with a shrug started to obey. Again Harbison halted him.

"You take the deck," he ordered, "and I'll lock up the prisoner. Turn the cook to with the others and get a reef on the foresail and a double reef in the main. It's coming on to blow and we're too short handed to take chances. I'll be on deck in five minutes."

It had not been Hansen's plan to leave Lowry alone with Harbison if he could help it, but he was not ready to precipitate matters without consulting Gomez. Furthermore, it was obvious that Harbison's orders to shorten sail were necessary. The wind had been steadily increasing in force during the time that had elapsed since Swansen's death cry had brought Lowry on deck, and now the *Sea Lass* was heeling under the gusts, burying her lee rail and rushing through the water at high speed. The mate jumped to the wheel, and as Lowry went down the cabin stairs ahead of Harbison he could hear Hansen shouting orders to the crew.

Lowry hoped for a word with Harbison in the cabin, but as they reached it, Gomez emerged from his stateroom, demanding to know what was happening. He appeared to have been aroused from sleep by the trampling on the deck overhead. With a curt word to Gomez that he'd see him at once, Harbison thrust Lowry into a stateroom and slammed the door. The stateroom was on the lee side and Lowry stumbled to its farther end before he could regain his balance. When he could get his ear to the door, everything was quiet outside. He judged that Gomez and Harbison had gone on deck.

After listening to the noises above, which told him that sail was being shortened, a fact verified by the easier movement of the schooner which followed, Lowry set himself to a collected consideration of the situation. If he had had doubts before, none remained now that Hansen, under Gomez's orders, intended to rid the *Sea Lass* of all doubtful members of her crew. Erickson and Swansen were dead, and Lowry felt that he would also have been killed had he not been needed to explain that second murder.

As he reviewed the happenings of the night he was certain José had stabbed Swansen and then had hidden in the shadow of the deckhouse when Lowry, as had been foreseen, responded to the victim's despairing cry for help. It had been planned ingeniously. Juarez, if not in the plot, was known to be asleep, so that Lowry, who had just gone below, would be almost certain to be first to respond. José had crept from his hiding place as soon as he knew Lowry was occupied at the wheel and had sandbagged him. That all seemed clear enough and bad enough.

But then Lowry thought of something that gave a ray of hope. Why had the mate been so careful to establish his whereabouts at the time of the stabbing? It took some thinking. José might be a skilful knife man, but he was not so powerful as to be given the task of knocking out so strong and active a person as Lowry himself. The mate was better fitted for that task and Lowry was certain he would have enjoyed it. He concluded that Hansen was not so sure of Juarez as he was of José and that the negro cook could not be in the plot at all. If he was, reasoned Lowry, Hansen could just as easily have hidden in the companionway to do the knocking out and have had the cook primed to tell the story about the galley visit.

Lowry counted them up. On one side were Gomez, Hansen, the Patriot and José. As neutrals, might be counted the cook, and perhaps Juarez and the Chinese boy. That left Sonia and her father, together with Lowry, to oppose four certain enemies. And Harbison and his daughter were as yet ignorant that the devil was loose on the *Sea Lass*.

ALTHOUGH the schooner was now riding easily under reduced convas, no one had left the deck so far as Lowry could judge. He began to wonder about the disposition of the staterooms and to wish mightily that he knew which was Sonia's. He knew from Harbison's statement that the captain's room was on one side of him and he knew that Gomez was housed on the opposite side of the schooner, but that was all. He put his ear first to one wall and then to the other, but could hear nothing. Then he tried knocking gently on the wall. His taps on the forward wall brought a muffled inquiry in Spanish and he knew he had discovered the quarters of the Patriot. He had hoped that Sonia's room might be next to his and that he would be able somehow to communicate with her. His disappointment was the keener as he realized that the partitions were thin and that it was quite possible to hear through them if one's ear was placed close.

Being unable to think of anyway to get in touch with Sonia, Lowry turned his attention to the handcuffs. He knew that he had unusually small hands and hoped that he might be able to slip the irons. But a few minutes trying earned him nothing but chafed wrists. He had thrown himself on his berth, resolved to get a few minutes sleep, if possible, when he heard the door of the Patriot's cabin open and close. Uncertain whether the Patriot had gone out or whether he had a visitor, Lowry pressed his ear close to the partition and listened, holding his breath and concentrating everything into his sense of hearing

It was Gomez who had joined his compatriot. Lowry recognized the voice and at the same time cursed an education that had not included Spanish. He could make out no more than that the older man was apparently somewhat displeased and was asking questions which Gomez answered in a conciliating tone. Then the door banged again and Hansen's rough tones cut through the musical Spanish. He, too, was displeased and impatient for answers. Also, to Lowry's delight, the mate wanted them in English or the equivalent.

"Cut the spiggoty," he ordered when Gomez continued the conversation in the language in which it had begun. "Cut the spiggoty and talk United States. I'm damn sick of the high and mightiness of this Harbison. 'You forget who's in command of this schooner, Mister Mate,' he says. Well, I'll damn soon teach him who's in command and I'd like to know what in hell you ever picked that mealy mouthed cuss for this job anyway."

"Jus' what I ask of Señor Gomez," broke in the Patriot. "Why run all of these reesk when Señor Gomez would easy get-a someone whose mouth would be close?"

Lowry heard Gomez's pleasant voice break in on the objectors. He spoke so softly that the listener could get only fragments, but he caught enough to tell him that Gomez was explaining that he had not picked Harbison for the job, but that circumstances had forced his hand—the circumstances being that Harbison had overheard a part of his conversation with their New York lieutenant, Dr. Excobar.

"I suspected him much and feared him a little," said Gomez. "His coming with an introduction from Hill of the Secret Service was a queer business. But when I investigate I find he is only a fool of a gentleman who has gone broke and whom the good God has given more pride than sense. I feel surely that it is better to have him where I can watch him."

Hansen, Lowry thought, had punctuated Gomez's recital with impatient grunts. Now he broke in, and Lowry had no difficulty in hearing.

"I know you, Gomez," he said. "You made up your mind to take Harbison when you saw his girl. You can't keep clear of a skirt, that's what's the matter. I don't give a cook's curse what you do ashore, but I hate women on a ship and the prettier they are the worse they are. What you going to do to keep that little cat's eyes shut when we land this cargo and how do you reckon your mealy mouthed gentleman is goin' to like it? You've fixed up a pretty mess, Gomez."

Lowry heard the Patriot apparently add his protest in staccato Spanish, and then Gomez's suave tones.

"I have a very nice plan to keep Harbison quiet. I shall marry his daughter. Ah yes, my intentions are quite honorable. I shall propose to the señorita tonight or tomorrow, and if she refuse me I shall explain to her that her father's honor is concern in this affair. And I shall tell him that if he do not do as I say and if he attempt the, as you say, double-cross he will find it of extreme difficulty to make a judge or a jury believe he is innocent when they shall listen to the story I will tell. The Captain Harbison is intelligent and he will be quick to see."

"And suppose he doesn't see?" came in Hansen's growl.

"Ah, then I regret there will have to be another accident on this so unlucky *Sea Lass,*" said Gomez. "And when our valuables are safe on shore, including the young lady, willing or unwilling, we will have to take the schooner to sea and sink her and then we will be picked up, sad shipwrecked survivors with a great tale to tell to the newspapers and to our friend Hill. And after that and other things the Señorita Harbison will be mos' glad if I still offer marriage."

There followed a moment of silence and then Hansen's growl—though now it was a growl of admiration.

"You're certainly a slick one, Gomez," he said. "My cap's off to your top hamper. But just let me handle Harbison when he turns nasty—and I'll lay my share he will. I've had enough of his fine gentleman ways. You're welcome to the girl, but just let me have my innings with Harbison."

As he heard the stateroom door open, announcing the end of the conference, Lowry flung himself on his berth, expecting Gomez and Hansen to look in on him. His head was whirling and he was fighting for self-control. Somehow, he must warn Sonia and her father—and without delay.

A key clicked in the lock and he braced himself to confront his captors.

The door opened. Lowry raised his head, ready to meet his enemies eye to eye boldly since the handcuffs prevented his doing anything more. But instead of Gomez, there entered only the diminutive Chinese steward, San Loo. He carried a tray with food on it. He set it down on the berth beside Lowry and eyed him keenly, apparently not at all afraid of the supposed murderer but very curious.

Lowry considered an instant, then took what seemed likely to be the only chance he would get to try to warn Sonia.

"Thanks, San Loo," he said. "You think I'm a pretty bad man?"

San Loo giggled silently and shook his head in denial. He obviously was not unfriendly, but was afraid to delay his return to his duties. He was edging toward the door.

"Wait a second," Lowry said, lowering his voice. He spoke rapidly. "I'm not a bad man, I assure you, San Loo, and I want you to do this: You go find Miss Harbison, and tell her—and don't tell anybody else or let anyone hear you tell her—'Patchy's friend wants to speak to her.' Let's hear you say it over, now."

The Chinese boy's expression did not change as he repeated it, creditably. He added a test question.

"You like Missee Hobbison?"

"You bet I do," Lowry declared. "And I don't want her to get hurt on this ship. So you tell her 'Patchy's friend wants to see her.' Then say that if she goes into her father's cabin and raps three times right there"—he indicated the wall to his left—"Patchy's friend can hear her. Tell her she must hurry."

San Loo blinked his bright little eyes and stepped into the corridor, shutting the door and locking it. Lowry, his nerves tightening, sat wondering if the little steward was as friendly as he seemed.

"Well," he muttered, "if he goes and tells it to Gomez, why that'll be that."

Then hunger and the practical difficulty of eating while handcuffed took his mind out of its whirl for a little while.

THE storm was keeping up. It filled his ears with its roar. His meal ended, Lowry sat motionless, straining to catch the sound of footsteps passing along to the cabin next door. From moments of keenest vigilance he would slip into leaden periods when he felt deaf and lulled in a nightmare. Each time he came alert again, hope rushed back.

He was lying in the berth nearest the captain's stateroom, with his ear pressed against the partition. And suddenly, though he had missed the footsteps, he heard the captain's door open and close, very gently. Three raps sounded close beside him.

Lowry did not move. He must keep his eyes on the door of his own cabin for precaution, and he must appear to be merely lying on the berth for comfort. This, of course, he had thought out before.

He opened his mouth to speak—and a flash of fear went suddenly over him. It might not be Sonia. Gomez might have intercepted San Loo, or San Loo been treacherous.

In the pause Sonia's voice spoke, low and distinct as the raps had been.

"Who is there?" she said, bridging her moment of doubt. Yet the tone of her voice was just for him.

"It's Robert, Sonia," he said in the same carrying tone. "Robert Lowry. Listen, dear——"

Her voice broke in, not rising, but on a more penetrating note.

"It *is* you, isn't it?" she said. And with almost a sob, "Tell me so."

"Yes, it is, Sonia," he answered, as if he caressed her. "And you must listen fast. No time to explain how I got here or why. You must tell your father that I'm here and he must find a way to see me at once. Not a minute to spare. Can you hear me, dear?"

There was no answer but to Lowry's amazement Sonia began to sing. Someone must be at the door of her stateroom and she feared she had been overheard. The words she sang came clearly:

"A wandering minstrel I,
A thing of shreds and patches . . ."

Lowry caught the emphasis on the last word. Sonia was letting him know that she had heard and understood.

Fifteen minutes later San Loo returned with his tray to collect the dishes. He worked swiftly. With a minimum of movements he unlocked Lowry's handcuffs, slid a heavy automatic and an extra clip of cartridges under the pillow, swept up the dishes and went out. He had not spoken a word and the entire business hadn't taken sixty seconds. Outside, Sonia was singing.

Lowry slipped the irons from his wrists and examined the weapon San Loo had brought. When he had made sure it worked, and how, he put it under the pillow and put the handcuffs back on his wrists, closing them as nearly as he could without locking them. He wanted to be ready in case Gomez or Hansen decided to take a look at their prisoner.

No one came, however, and Lowry guessed that the storm was keeping Hansen busy; and that, short handed as the *Sea Lass* was, Gomez, too, was needed on deck. Fine; but in that case Harbison might find no chance to come below, even providing Sonia had a chance to deliver the message to him. Well, there was nothing more to do but wait. He lay down again, keeping a watchful eye on the door. Presently he thought he heard a key click. Yes, the doorknob was being slowly turned.

Lowry braced himself for action. He had decided that if either Gomez or Hansen came alone he would try to capture his visitor and lessen the odds before the fight began. He must work quickly and prevent, if possible, any outcry.

But when the door opened softly, it was Sonia who stepped in. For a moment she stared at his bearded, sun blackened face and Lowry stared back. At the look of doubt and fear that darkened her eyes he spoke quickly:

"Sonia, dear, don't you know me?"

He tried to smile, but only accomplished a grin, and it was the grin that did it. Sonia would have known that through the whiskers of Methuselah. Then she was in his arms, half crying, half laughing.

When she regained her self-control, she drew herself free from Lowry's arms and started to speak. But at that instant, the door banged open and the Patriot appeared, balancing uncertainly in the doorway. His startled half shout was cut short by a heavy roll of the schooner which sent him headlong into the room. Lowry had thrown off the handcuffs when Sonia had entered, and the Patriot, therefore, brought up in a grasp that choked all the noise out of him. Then, while Lowry prodded him with the automatic, Sonia slipped on the handcuffs. Lowry was tearing a strip from the bedding to gag their prisoner with when a cry from Sonia whirled him about as from a blow.

Gomez was standing just outside the

stateroom door. If he was surprised at the tableau he didn't show it. He was smiling—and it was a rather pleasant smile—as he raised his revolver and took careful aim at Lowry. At that range he could hardly miss in spite of the uneasy deck under his feet. He paused to bow to Sonia.

"I trust the señorita will forgive the necessity," he said and pulled the trigger as Lowry leaped forward.

For a moment, Lowry, half blinded by the blast, thought he had been hit. Then he was aware that Sonia had cried out, as she crumpled to the floor behind him. He forgot Gomez and turned to the girl. She lay motionless, a trickle of crimson coming through the bright hair above her brow. Then Lowry remembered Gomez. With a shout that was the bellow of an enraged animal he charged the doorway. The Mexican was waiting with his revolver raised, peering into the stateroom with a half puzzled, half frightened look and steadying himself against the roll of the vessel which had saved Lowry by the fraction of an inch.

He fired again as Lowry sprang, but Lowry had dived in a flying tackle and Gomez came crashing to the floor. Lowry let go his grip on Gomez's knees and reached for his throat. But the Mexican wriggled from his grasp. The revolver had been hurled from Gomez's hand as he fell, and he now dodged around the table and seized a water bottle from the rack. This he threw with all his might. Lowry, vaulting over the obstruction to get to Gomez, got the heavy bottle full on the temple. It felled him and actually rolled him away from Gomez's feet.

Gomez drew a long breath and looked about for his gun. Not seeing it, he drew a businesslike knife from his belt. He meant to take no chances.

SAN LOO, at the sound of the first shot, had run from his cubby-hole of a steward's pantry forward of the cabin, had seen Lowry grapple with Gomez and had crouched in the passageway watching in wide eyed terror. Now as Gomez drew his knife and stepped towards the prostrate Lowry, San Loo saw what galvanized him into action: Sonia, standing in the doorway of the stateroom. Her gray eyes looked almost black in her white face, across which crept slowly the crimson stain. Holding to the door frame with one hand, she was trying to steady the revolver she held in the other.

Gomez swerved from his stride towards the prostrate Lowry and, bending low, leaped for the girl. He was met by a small, compact body that hurtled through the air and fell upon his shoulders clawing and kicking. There was something terrifying in the desperate single-mindedness of San Loo's attack. Gomez tried to use his knife, but only succeeded in slitting the wide sleeve of San Loo's blouse. Then a kind of panic seized him and, throwing off the boy, Gomez bolted for the deck, with San Loo's yell of "Shoot, missy, shoot!" urging him on. Halfway up the stairs he collided with Harbison who had been forward when the fight started and who had, the moment before, become aware of the commotion in the cabin. Gomez slashed viciously at Harbison, dodged under the arm the captain raised in guard and gained the deck.

As Sonia had had no opportunity to put her father on his guard, the spectacle that confronted him was astounding and obviously called for action.

His daughter was bending above the senseless form of the bearded sailor who had been accused of the murder of Swansen; San Loo was backed against the table, a revolver in each hand; and the cabin was filled with the acrid smoke of the firing.

Harbison reached his daughter's side in one jump. She raised a blood and tear stained face.

"Quick!" she commanded. "Help me get Robert into your room. Hurry!"

Harbison caught Lowry under the shoulders and dragged him swiftly to the captain's quarters at the after side of the cabin. Sonia held the door wide and San Loo crouched beside them, keeping an eye on the companionway stairs. Hansen's deep growl and the pounding of feet on the stairs told that no time was to be lost. But San Loo, firing at random, sent a lucky shot crashing into the bottom step and halted the attack from the deck. In another moment Lowry had been dragged inside, San Loo had glided after, and the door was slammed to and barricaded.

Ten seconds later a bullet smashed through an upper panel of the door and buried itself in the rear wall.

"Keep clear of the door," shouted

Harbison and calling San Loo to help him he pushed all the movables in the cabin against the one vulnerable spot. Rolling up the faded rug—relic of the former glory of the yacht—he draped it over the barricade as a guard against flying splinters. But after the first shot, all was quiet outside. Harbison guessed that Hansen had returned to the deck to look after the sailing of the schooner and to take counsel with Gomez. There would be some moments, anyway, to learn what had happened and to prepare for the next attack. Now that there was time to think, he remembered that Sonia was wounded and rushed to her with a cry of grief. But the girl waved him away.

"I'm not hurt, just scratched," she said. "Get something to help me revive Robert. I know he isn't dead, I know he isn't dead!"

As Harbison turned away to find his flask the frantic girl threw her arms about Lowry's neck and shook him violently.

Perhaps her voice called back the wandering senses, but more likely it was the shaking that brought young Mr. Lowry back to the land of reality. He opened his eyes and struggled to sit up, the obsession of battle still on him. Then he knew whose arms held him and he relaxed. It took the stinging dose of raw brandy that Harbison poured down his throat to bring Lowry fully around.

While San Loo listened by the door, Lowry sketched as rapidly as possible the events that had led up to the battle. He didn't stop to explain how or why he had followed the *Sea Lass* nor the means by which he had arrived at Port Limon before her. He forgot for the moment the cargo of narcotics, and told simply of the killing of Erickson and Swansen, and of Gomez's plan to do away with the others.

Harbison listened in dazed silence.

"But why," he asked finally, "all this plotting and killing? I don't see any reason for it"

Then Lowry remembered to tell about the cargo. He did so, swiftly.

"It's a big lot of the stuff," he said. "Probably worth several hundred thousand dollars if Gomez can get it into the United States. It's stowed in the hold on top of the ballast. You see, Gomez counted on securing your silence by forcing a marriage with Sonia, or, failing that, to send you to join Swansen and Erickson. He wanted to wait until the *Sea Lass* was within easy sailing distance of whatever landing place he has picked out, before he made his final play. By that time he had planned to have the uncertain members of the crew out of the way by 'accident.' Then he, together with Hansen, the Patriot, José and perhaps the cook and the other Mexican, would have an easy time disposing of you. I don't know how they figured San Loo here and I didn't know how to place him; but I took a desperate chance. The Patriot, of course, was just a blind for the real purpose of this cruise, and you were put in command because you had blundered into Gomez's plans and he thought he could kill two birds with one stone. If Sonia hadn't come along, Gomez would probably have carried out his original plan and the *Sea Lass*, her master and part of her crew would have been officially reported lost at sea."

Harbison was puzzled by some details. He wanted to ask how Lowry had managed to get wind of the plot and how he had arrived in Port Limon, but his thoughts were diverted to present necessities by a loud hammering on the outside of the door.

San Loo promptly fired a shot through a crevice in the barricade. The shot was answered by a derisive laugh and then Hansen's growl demanding a parley.

"Might as well surrender now, an' it'll be the better for you if you do. We kin starve you out or shoot you out. You ain't got a chance. If I had my way there wouldn't be no terms, but Gomez says that if you do as he says there won't no harm come to your daughter."

San Loo was maneuvering about trying to find an angle from which he might send a shot through the barricade in the direction of the voice, but Harbison waved him aside.

"Why doesn't Gomez deliver his own message?" he demanded.

Hansen laughed.

"He's patchin' up his face where that Chinese devil clawed him and I guess he's a little gun shy just now, too—but that won't help you any," he added. "The señor'll fight when it comes to the point an' we got you cornered. We got a few tricks you never heard of an' we'll smoke you out like bilge rats if you cut up nasty. Now here's what Gomez says an' you can take it or leave it.

"You're captain of this schooner, as I remember your tellin' me, Harbison, an' as such an' bein' as we're on the high seas you has the same right as a sky pilot. Gomez stands ready to marry your daughter here an' now, you performing the ceremony as by law pervided. Gomez figures you won't make trouble with your lovin' son-in-law an' he'll split his share o' this run with you an' everybody'll be happy. I think he's a damn fool to bother with you, but that's the lay; an' I'm waiting for an answer."

Harbison's face had flushed as he listened and his hand clenched on the pistol it held until the knuckles were white, but it was Sonia who answered. Before her father could speak she stepped to the side of the barricade.

"Oh, Mister Hansen," she called pleasantly. "This is Miss Harbison. Do I understand that Señor Gomez has sent you as his messenger to ask me to marry him?"

"That's the lay, miss." Hansen's growl showed he was a little taken aback.

"Very well. Now listen closely, Mister Hansen, and try to remember. I want you to tell Señor Gomez that I appreciate his offer in its full significance and that I am very happy to have the alternative of dying decently with gentlemen. Tell him, too, that I am an excellent shot and that while I'd hate to fire on a dog, I don't in the least mind shooting reptiles. That's all, Mister Hansen. You may go now."

San Loo, who had sidled up to the barrier again, uttered a high pitched "Hi, yi, yi!" of applause and put a period to Sonia's speech with a shot that must have passed close to Hansen, for an answering shot thudded into the barricade and there were sounds that indicated Hansen was making a hurried retreat.

"Good girl," said Harbison. "Don't know as I could have found the words for it. Now, let's see how our fighting strength stands. They've got us cornered, but as long as the gale lasts Hansen will be needed on deck and he'll be busy. Just now I'm more worried about the schooner than about any danger from Gomez and his gang. How are we for ammunition?"

The count showed four revolvers, San Loo having recovered and brought with him the weapon Gomez had lost in the saloon, and Harbison having two of his own, and Sonia her small weapon. Harbison's arms were heavy automatics, but Sonia's gun and the one taken from Gomez were ordinary double action revolvers. Sonia's was still fully loaded, but two chambers of Gomez's pistol had been emptied at Lowry, and San Loo had used two more, leaving only two unexploded cartridges in the chamber. However, there was extra ammunition for the automatics, and Harbison believed they could stand off any direct attack. As to personnel, Sonia had been only slightly scratched by the bullet fired at Lowry and that young man was now quite recovered, although his head was adorned with an egg shaped swelling which, added to his beard, made him an object that should have excited derision or fear. It may be laid to the general mystery of woman that Sonia was stirred, as she looked at him, by quite different emotions.

SAN LOO was left at the listening post by the door while the others discussed plans for defense. Lowry, remembering that the hold of the schooner where the narcotics were stowed ran as far aft as he had been able to observe, asked Harbison if it was possible for the enemy to get beneath them. Harbison thought not, as there was a bulkhead just abaft the mainmast step. Sonia interrupted them to point out the outlines of what appeared to be a trapdoor in the floor, which the removal of the rug had revealed. Lowry worked at it with the broken end of a clasp knife and finally succeeded in prying up one edge. The unhinged square of flooring being removed, left a dark hole into which Lowry peered without being able to distinguish anything. He lighted a match and, holding it below the opening, discovered that he was looking into a kind of cubby-hole, the flooring of which was only four or five feet below the cabin. Harbison told him that such storage spaces were common on ships, but Lowry felt the itch to explore this one.

He wanted, for one thing, to assure himself that there was no door in the bulkhead and therefore no danger of an attack from that quarter. Sonia took one of the lamps from its bracket and held it at the opening while Lowry swung himself down. Seeing that the distance was short she set the lamp on the floor and slid after him, finding that she could easily reach back and get the lamp. By its light they explored the shadows.

The bulkhead was without opening and they found nothing of consequence until Sonia stubbed her toe on a large box.

"Isn't this an ammunition box?" she asked Lowry. "Maybe there'll be some cartridges in it that will fit our pistols."

Lowry lifted the box.

"Not heavy enough for ammunition," he decided, but he pushed it up through the opening to the cabin floor above. Then he lifted Sonia up and climbed after her. They found San Loo still at the door and Harbison deep in the study of a chart spread out on the table. Sonia had the curiosity of her sex about what's in a box, and Lowry indulged her by prying off the cover. They stared silently at the contents.

"Why, it's money," Sonia exclaimed. "It's filled with money!"

Lowry lifted out the neatly stacked packages of bills. They appeared to be all of large denominations and to be arranged in the packages in order of value. Harbison dropped his chart and at Lowry's suggestion noted down the figures as Lowry counted. When the listing was finished Harbison figured a moment and then whistled.

"It's fifty thousand dollars! How do you suppose it got there?"

Their best guess was that the money belonged to Gomez, that it was part of the funds, perhaps, necessary to finance his big drug deal. Gomez might very well have reasons for preferring cash in hand to bank drafts.

"He may have hid it here when we were taking on the narcotics," suggested Lowry. "Didn't dare keep it in his stateroom." Then an unpleasant thought struck him. "He'll be crazy to get us out of here. Probably he's the only one who knows about the money and he's got sense enough to know that we might easily discover its hiding place."

As if in answer to his speculations there came a crashing blow at the door that hurled it from its hinges, back against the barricade. Through the opening bullets came as fast as two automatics could send them, and the noise outside resembled an old fashioned Fourth of July celebration.

Lowry swung Sonia to the floor near the barricade and crouched beside her. Harbison and the Chinese boy were on the other side, keeping low and watching for a chance to fire.

It didn't need a West Point tactician to figure out what had happened. Hansen had brought down a spare boat boom and organized his cohorts into a battering ram party. Now that the door was down, one of the attackers, probably Gomez, was standing on the companionway stairs, shooting over the barricade, and presently the others would attack under cover of the barrage.

The defenders tensed themselves for the assault but none came. Instead, the heavy couch which formed the cornerstone, so to speak, of the barricade was violently agitated. Inch by inch it was being pushed inward. The attackers meant to clear the doorway before making their charge, and one or two of them had crawled close to the outer side of the obstruction where they were as well sheltered as the besieged.

Lowry crept along the wall and, reaching his pistol through the doorway, fired at random. A bullet cut through the framework near his wrist, in return, and sent a stinging blast of splinters into his arm. But he kept on firing rapidly. It was, however, San Loo who ended the battle. He had laid aside his revolver in favor of a carving knife which he had found on the table, and as the barricade was pushed back he slid into the gap, saw a black arm and a brown one, made a cut and a thrust and slid back before a bullet could find him.

There was a loud outcry outside and the sound of hurried retreat which Lowry encouraged with another volley of shots. San Loo crawled in front of the barricade and, peering cautiously about, reported that the enemy had retired from the saloon. A hurried council of war determined that it was best to try to hold the saloon and the entire after part of the schooner below decks, and to leave the cabin for a final citadel. San Loo was told to guard the passageway through his own former quarters, while Lowry covered the companionway. Sonia suddenly remembered the Patriot whom they had left handcuffed and partly gagged in Lowry's stateroom. She looked in at the door, but somewhat to her relief he was gone.

THE schooner was riding easily now. It was apparent that the gale had blown itself out. This meant less danger from one source and more from another. The vessel was out of trouble for the time being, but Hansen and Gomez would be able to devote all their energies to the war.

The truce lasted so long, however, that Lowry had time to realize that he had a splitting headache, thanks to Gomez's bottle throwing, and to forget the annoyance in a dawning realization that Sonia had responded to his embrace as naturally as if they counted their acquaintanceship by years instead of days. Then he wished heartily for a razor, but realizing that handsome is as handsome does, came out of his reverie to fire at a pair of legs which appeared on the companionway stairs. He missed, the legs vanished, and the hatch banged shut.

"Ought to have waited," he muttered, yet knew he was glad he hadn't been called upon to pot-shot one of the enemy.

San Loo called Harbison to relieve him, and presently emerged from his pantry with the makings of a very decent cold meal. It was now late afternoon and they were all ready for food. As they ate, Lowry asked Harbison about the position of the *Sea Lass*. Harbison answered that they were approximately one hundred and fifty miles south of Fire Island Light and heading north-by-east, a course which would carry them clear of the Long Island coast. It occurred to Lowry that Gomez might keep the schooner at sea and try to starve them out since all of the supplies except San Loo's small store were in the hands of the enemy; but he said nothing. Time enough to add that to their troubles.

Sonia came and stood by him and they chatted of Patchy, and the dog Barnum, making the most of the happy incidents of their brief meetings and delighting to recall them. Lowry was telling about finding the note and of his rescue of Patchy from the woods when he bethought him that in a moment he would be having to explain about something else. He was relieved that Harbison broke in on them to say that it would be getting dark in an hour and that they must prepare lights enough to prevent the possibility of a surprise attack in the dark.

"Fog has followed the wind," he said, "and the darkness will come quickly. Hope Hansen will have sense enough to keep a sharp lookout. We're nearing the steamer lanes and— Hear that?"

The deep note of a ship's siren sounded close to starboard. But the next blast was farther off and astern. That danger had passed. Harbison turned to help Sonia with the lamps while San Loo and Lowry maintained guard.

There was still an hour before dark, but the fog had brought an early dusk to the saloon and as soon as the lamps were ready Sonia lighted them, placing them out of range of possible bullets.

They were all very quite now and tense with the strain of listening. Lowry thought he heard the companionway hatch slide open. He fired a shot up the stairs by way of warning. There was no answering shot, but in a moment an odd looking cylinder came whirling down and fell at his feet. As he bent over it the thing burst into flame which was followed by a dense smoke. In a moment he was half blinded and his lungs were straining for breath as the acrid fumes penetrated. He staggered back. Sonia had run to one of the staterooms. He heard her calling to the others to open the ports. But he was sure that those on deck would expect just that and would take advantage of the confusion to attack. Breathing as sparingly as possible he crouched near the companionway.

A second bomb followed the first. Gomez and Hansen knew that presently the besieged would have to come up or smother in the fumes.

It was San Loo who saved the situation. At the first burst of smoke he had disappeared into the alleyway leading to his quarters, with a yell of "Devil-devil smoke!" By the time the second bomb had fallen he was back, carrying two bags of salt. He ripped them open with his knife and spread the contents over the diabolical engines which by then had set the saloon deck afire. The salt smothered them with magical ease. In a matter of seconds the fumes had begun to lift, and with smarting eyes and aching throats the besieged looked about them.

"Can't stand much more of that sort of thing," said Harbison. "Better get back in my cabin. We can fix up the door and we'll get enough ventilation in there so they can't smoke us out."

Lowry disliked the idea of being cornered again, and they were debating the question when the necessity of decision was taken from them. Close at hand sounded the wailing call of a ship's siren. Almost immediately the schooner received a smashing blow on the port side. She heeled under the impact until everything movable slid to starboard. Lowry managed to grasp Sonia as she hurtled past him and to break the force of their collision with the stateroom door. San Loo had been on the lower side and was unhurt, but Harbison took a nasty tumble and came up with a limp. He looked once to see that Sonia was uninjured and then became all seaman as he watched critically the schooner's slow movement as she righted herself.

"She's hard hit," he said. "Won't last long. We'll have to get out of here."

The boat that had rammed them was still sounding her whistle, but from farther away. Apparently she had struck the *Sea Lass* a glancing blow and slid on into the fog, where her captain was doing his best to make the schooner aware of his position in case help was needed. But there was no answering sound from the *Sea Lass*. Gomez and Hansen were going to chance anything rather than rescue, and were counting on the fog.

Lowry and Harbison crowled up the companionway stairs only to find the hatch closed and locked. All was silent on the deck outside. They retreated hurriedly to the saloon and fired their pistols from the stateroom ports hoping to signal the steamship. But her whistle came faintly in the distance, and Harbison knew how fog deadens and distorts sound. He gave the effort up at once and returned to the companionway.

Already the *Sea Lass* was showing a pronounced list to port and was somewhat down by the head. She might float for hours or she might not last minutes.

THE spare boom which Hansen had used as a battering ram had been left below when the first attack had failed. It now lay partly wedged in a stateroom door where it had been flung when the schooner was knocked to her beam ends. Lowry and Harbison tugged it free and started for the companionway. They meant to batter their way to the deck and take the last chance that seemed open. Sonia quick to catch the meaning of the action, sprang to their side, her revolver ready. San Loo gripped his carving knife.

The boom was an awkward thing to handle in the narrow space of the stairway, and before Lowry and Harbison could get into position to deliver an effective blow the hatch slid back and a shot sent them tumbling out of range. Sonia fired back, but Lowry pulled her out of the line of fire. Before the besieged could renew the attack they heard the hatch close and there came the sound of something heavy thrown against the exit.

"They're barricading us in," shouted Lowry and ran up the steps. Harbison joined him and they battered at the hatch and companionway door. It splintered but didn't give.

Then came Hansen's growl, triumphant now:

"Sink, ye rats! We've stove in the second boat and we're leavin' what's left o' the schooner."

Apparently Gomez made some protest, for Hansen replied:

"I say, no. Let pretty face drown with the rest of 'em. We've lost our cargo and everything all along o' her and her dad. Get a move on now, I'm runnin' this show an' if you don't jump smart I'll leave you to keep 'em company."

But Gomez had something else to say, for in a moment Hansen exploded in an incredulous string of oaths, amid which Lowry caught the shout of, "Fifty thousand dollars!" He knew then that the Mexican had at long last decided to tell the mate about the money he had secreted beneath the floor of the captain's cabin.

Hansen appeared to have gone insane at the knowledge of a fortune within his reach. He tore at the barricade, yelled commands to the others to help him and punctuated his orders by emptying his revolver through the hatch. None of his bullets found a mark, but Lowry and Harbison retreated once more to the saloon and made ready to meet the frenzied attack.

San Loo, who had been scouting along the passageway forward, hurried back at the sound of firing. He reported that he had found the end of the passage unguarded and that so far as he could see the door leading to the galley stair was only locked, not barricaded. As he talked another smoke bomb fell in the saloon and the racket above indicated that Hansen was marshaling his forces for a rush.

"Come on!" Lowry shouted. "If we can get to the deck while Hansen and his gang are below we can turn the tables and hold them there."

He caught Sonia's hand and they ran down the passage, while San Loo and Harbison followed as a rear guard, pausing to send back a shot or two to hold up the rush of Hansen's cohorts.

San Loo was right. The door which gave access to the ladder leading from the cabin passage to the galley was easily broken down, and in a minute's time Lowry, closely followed by the others, was getting his first sight of the *Sea Lass's* deck since José had felled him. And it took only a glance to show the damage done in the collision. The schooner's rail was torn away and the deck ripped up, beginning just forward of the fore rigging and extending nearly to amidships. The foremast swayed drunkenly and threatened to go by the board any moment as the *Sea Lass*, listing sharply to port and down by the head, rose and fell sluggishly in the swell left by the gale. No effort had been made to lower the sails and the fore and main booms thrashed across the deck when the vessel rolled in the trough. The port lifeboat lay in splinters by the rail, but the big motor boat at the starboard side was swung out on the davits ready for lowering.

And in it crouched the Patriot. Apparently he had been receiving and stowing provisions when Gomez's desperation made him announce the fact of the cabin treasure and preparations to embark had been broken off. The Patriot had undoubtedly not dared to climb back on deck. He had a mighty fear of the water, but he was alert enough to note the arrival of Lowry and the others on deck and courageous enough to oppose their advance.

He crouched lower in the boat and his first shot sent splinters flying from the galley uncomfortably close to Lowry's head. Lowry and Harbison returned the fire, but fearing to injure the boat and so destroy their only chance of escape they fired too high. The Patriot was taking deliberate aim for a second shot when Providence in the person of Juarez disposed summarily of his case.

When the rush on the cabin started, whoever had charge of the bow falls of the boat had made them fast. But Juarez's slow mind had failed to decipher the sudden change of action, and he did not move from his place. He was still standing there, by the stern tackle, when the besieged appeared on deck. He had crouched by the rail when the firing started and now, realizing that he was in the line of fire, he suddenly let go the rope and ran aft.

The stern of the lifeboat dropped sharply and then checked violently as the falls fouled in the block. The Patriot in the very act of firing was catapulted into the sea.

Juarez, fleeing aft, was met at the companionway hatch by Hansen who had rushed back to the deck at the sound of the shots. Whether he mistook the Mexican for one of the enemy or acted in blind rage cannot be told. But without an instant's hesitation he pistoled the unfortunate sailor and dodged behind the mainmast as Lowry and Harbison opened fire. Hansen was joined in an instant by Gomez, José and the negro cook.

Harbison pulled Sonia down in the shelter of the galley, but she wriggled along the deck to where Lowry had thrown himself flat and added a steady and well directed fire to his, helping to keep the enemy occupied in seekng shelter.

"Slow down your fire," came Harbison's warning. "The ammunition is nearly gone."

As the fire dwindled, Hansen and Gomez became more bold and bullets were striking uncomfortably close when a crack that drowned the puny sound of the pistols announced the breaking of the foremast. It swept majestically off to port, gathering speed as it fell, and as the besieged cowered close to the galley wall, they saw the mainmast take up the strain for a moment and then with a louder crash of rending wood break sharp off at the hounds and topple after its mate.

The instinct that draws men together in the face of unexpected peril had caused Hansen, Gomez and the other two to huddle in a group near the wheel. So they stood when the butt of the mast swung back across the deck. It struck the after end of the cabin and smashed it into kindling wood and passed on, sweeping away binnacle, wheel and rail. When the débris had settled, the after deck was untenanted of human beings.

SO SWIFTLY had it all happened that the group by the galley were silent in awestruck wonder for some seconds. Lowry crouched, with Sonia held close, as though his body could shield her from such titanic forces. San Loo lay prone, praying to such gods as were his. Harbison, first to recover himself, ran aft, made certain that the enemy had been literally swept from the decks and then stood at the gap in the taffrail peering into the mist that shrouded the sea. The stillness was unbroken except for the dull pounding of the wreckage overside.

Harbison turned quickly to the lifeboat. It had escaped serious damage, although littered with débris. A swift inventory showed provisions in plenty, a cask of water and a compass. The others had come to life and were ready at his command. Sonia and San Loo were helped in first. Harbison and Lowry were preparing to lower away when the Chinese boy suddenly scrambled back over the rail and darted aft. He made his way through the tangle of wreckage and disappeared down the after companionway. Before the others could recover from the unexpectedness of this move he was on the way back, hugging fondly his most prized possession, a cheap nickel alarm clock, and dragging negligently the treasure box. The schooner gave a warning lurch and there were no further delays in embarkation.

They were hardly clear when the *Sea Lass* slowly dipped her bow and slid beneath the surface. A moment later and the small boat was alone in the soft grayness of the fog.

A somber quiet held them. Harbison broke it, in a voice that shook a little.

"Everybody listen for whistles," he said. "If this fog lifts we ought to be picked up in a few hours. Plenty of craft of all kinds hereabouts."

It was Lowry who answered.

"Do we want to be picked up?" he asked. "Can't we get in without help?"

Harbison was at first startled, then interested.

"Why, yes," he said. "We can't be more than fifty or at the most seventy-five miles off the Long Island coast, probably to the eastward of Montauk, and if the sea stays calm and the motor work we ought to get into the Sound in twenty-four hours. But we're certain to sight th lights of ships once the fog lifts, and I don't like to take chances with Sonia o board. If it came on to blow, and our engine went bad, we might be in for a hard. time."

Lowry found himself tongue-tied. He shared Harbison's anxiety to save Sonia from further danger, and he knew the possibilities of privation in a small boat on the high sea. On the other hand, he was most anxious to escape the publicity necessarily attendant upon arriving in New York as rescued castaways. If that happened, there would have to be full explanations, and an official inquiry into the loss of the *Sea Lass* would follow. There would be little or no chance to escape the revelation of his own identity. He had first to ask Sonia a question and get a definite answer. He felt sure that the present was no time for that. So he presented a part of the facts. He pointed out the undesirability of having Sonia made a newspaper heroine and the general messiness of the whole proceeding.

Harbison had not thought of that side of the matter. He was now impressed by the picture Lowry drew and he also realized that, with no known owners to report to and no underwriters to satisfy, it was quite possible for the *Sea Lass* to drop out of sight, figuratively, as completely as she had done actually.

Sonia followed the discussion without comment. She sensed that Lowry had other reasons than those he was presenting; but she too was dismayed at the thought of having to tell officials and reporters the story of the tragic voyage. Already the past twenty-four hours seemed a fantastic nightmare. She was beginning to feel the reaction from the terrific strain, and as Lowry talked, she visioned the peace of Cove Cottage longingly.

"I'm sure Robert is right," she said. "We're all good sailors and it ought to be easy for us to go where we like even if the weather gets bad. Come on and let's see if this engine is as good as Patchy's."

She found relief in working with familiar machinery. Lowry joined her, and, having ascertained that the gasoline tank was full, they turned the engine over and were rewarded with the cheering *put, put* of the motor. Harbison said no more, but put the boat on a course that as nearly as he could figure, would bring them somewhere on the broadside of the Connecticut coast. Sonia and Lowry maintained a sharp lookout, while San Loo tried what kind of a meal he could put together.

In an hour the fog lifted, and, it was not long before they sighted the lights of a large steamship inward bound. Her course enabled Harbison to roughly correct his own. A quartering breeze sprang up, and the little boat, under both sail and motor, cut through the water smartly.

Sitting at the tiller, Harbison found time to review the extraordinary happenings of his venture. For the first time, it struck him full force that the presence of Lowry in Port Limon was remarkable and his appearance as a member of the *Sea Lass's* crew still more so.

Robert Lowry . . . The name seemed somehow familiar, yet he couldn't place it. Sonia and the young man seemed on most intimate terms and they had met only once or twice before the *Sea Lass* sailed.

Harbison gave it up and turned sadly to thinking how nearly fatal had been his first attempt to better his and Sonia's fortunes. Presently, they would be home, poorer, if anything, than before and with no desire to go adventuring again. As he mused, his eye wandered from the compass face and fell on San Loo curled up asleep near his feet. In one hand the boy grasped his alarm clock, while in the circle of his arm lay the treasure box which had been, perhaps, their salvation.

Fifty thousand dollars! With that he could do the things he had wanted, give Sonia all he wanted her to have—opportunity to meet the people of his old world and find wider interests than a decrepit automobile and a battered sailboat.

But he shook his head. The apparently ownerless fortune was certainly not his.

LATE the following afternoon, land was sighted. Harbison had been lucky in his dead reckoning. San Loo's clock showed a little after midnight when the boat slid in at the Cove Cottage pier.

It was a strangely quiet ending for so eventful a voyage and they found themselves unconsciously speaking almost in whispers as Sonia led the way to the house. Lowry, still intent upon avoiding inquiry, asked Harbison if the presence of a strange boat in the cove might not excite comment, but Harbison thought not. He pointed out that the boat was not stenciled with the schooner's name, and that when old Bill Hendricks the fisherman saw her, he would doubtless conclude that it was only some yacht's tender that Harbison had picked up for a song.

So Lowry was content as he watched Sonia move briskly about in spite of the fatigue of the hours in the boat. She concocted a magic meal from such provisions as had been left in the house, dismissed Lowry's evident desire to take up a discussion of the situation with a smiling but emphatic "No talk until we've all had a night's sleep," and assigned them to their rooms.

In spite of great physical weariness Lowry slept fitfully. At daybreak he was broad awake. He dressed and made his way quietly out of doors. Walking along the beach he tried to think out a plan of action. After breakfast, would come explanations. He was ready for them, but first he simply must see Sonia alone. The question he wanted to ask her must be asked and answered before he could tell the truth about himself

Barnum, the Sealyham, came to greet him as he stood with anxiety written large on a countenance not used to it. A human acquaintance might not have recognized Lowry; but to Barnum a beard was nothing between friends. Lowry had a bright idea. He engaged Barnum in a romp in the hope that the dog's merry bark might awaken Sonia and bring her from the house. But although Barnum barked his mightiest, there was no sight of Sonia until she came out on the porch to wave a greeting and to call that breakfast was ready. Her father had followed her and Lowry saw that there would be no chance for a private word. It was, however, a delightful occasion. Barnum broke the habit of a lifetime by coming into the house with them, to be entertained as royalty by San Loo in the kitchen.

Harbison's face appeared deeply careworn. It was easy to guess that he, too, had spent a restless night. As the meal ended, he asked Lowry and Sonia to join him in the living room.

"I've been thinking things out," he said, "and I don't see how we can keep this thing quiet. We have been witnesses of and in a way unknowing accomplices in several crimes. The Government should be informed of the possibilities of a new ingress of drugs. The seamen who were killed on the *Sea Lass* may have left families who, when they do not return, will anxiously seek news of their fate. Finally there is this matter of the fifty thousand dollars which, while doubtless formerly the property of a scoundrel, may through his death now belong to quite innocent persons. I don't think I need to argue about it. It certainly is my duty to lay all the facts before the Federal district attorney and leave to his judgment the course affairs will take."

Harbison paused a moment and then turning to Lowry, who had remained silent, he went on:

"You, perhaps, have good reasons for wishing to keep what has happened from reaching the public. I confess that I have an equal distaste for publicity in this matter, but I am as strongly in revolt against keeping silence about murder. You must remember, sir, that while you have been of the greatest service to my daughter and to me, have doubtless saved our lives, and more than our lives, nevertheless we know very little about you. It seems to me that the time has come for you to take us into your confidence a little—at least to the extent of telling us who you are, how it came about that you traced the destination of the *Sea Lass*, and how you came to be in Port Limon when we reached there."

Remembering her note, Sonia could make a shrewd guess at the answer to one of her father's questions. She was as anxious as he to learn Lowry's answers to the others, but something urged her to protest against putting him so abruptly on the grill.

"Oh, father—" she began.

But Harbison would bear no interruption. He turned again to Lowry with a final "Well?" and awaited the answer.

As Harbison had talked, Lowry had caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror beside the door. He saw reflected there a sun blackened face, framed in unkempt whiskers, and he was aware also of the disreputable clothes which had been part of his Port Limon disguise. Anything b a romantic figure of a rescuing knig Yet it was in this ridiculous guise and i this presence that he must put his fortu to the touch.

He was pale under the tan as he rose t answer, feeling that he must be on h feet to face the issue.

"I will answer your questions fully i a moment," he said slowly. "But first must ask one." Turning from Harbis he looked straight into Sonia's startl eyes.

"Sonia," he said, "will you marry me?"

The bright color surged to the girl's fac and then as suddenly she was pale. Sh silenced a half voiced protest from he father, with a quick gesture, and then, looking steadily at Lowry, she answered:

"I will marry you, Robert."

If Harbison had been stunned by question and answer so amazing under the circumstances, he was entirely overwhelmed by the result. The tatterdemalion youn man across the table apparently went mad.

With a shout that brought San Loo and Barnum running from the kitchen, he leaped across the room, seized Sonia by the hands and started a wild dance about the room that left them both breathless with Sonia clinging to him half laughing, half sobbing, but not omitting to realiz that he hadn't once kissed her. He quieted down suddenly.

"Forgive me," he begged Harbison. "A moment ago I was the most desperate man in the world and now I'm the happiest. I can explain it all now. I am——"

He broke off and looked about him, caught the eager light in Sonia's eyes and the doubting frown gathering on Harbison's face, hesitated, and then went on:

"Do you know the law firm of Johnson, Johnson & Johnson in New York?"

Harbison nodded. Speech was quite beyond him. Lowry went ahead rapidly.

"Please telephone them. Ask for the senior member, Mr. John Johnson. Tell him who you are and that I am here, and ask him to get here as fast as possible. I'd like, if you please, to leave the explanations, or rather the most important part of them, until he comes. And, sir," he added, "I won't ask your consent to marry Sonia until he comes, and I won't say another word to Sonia until then—but I *would* like to borrow your razor, sir."

As he finished his speech, Lowry's grave face broke into the grin which had been his first introduction to Sonia and she felt the tension lessen. She understood now why an important detail had been omitted a moment since, and sweeping him a low bow she ran out, calling back.

"We wait your highness's pleasure."

Lowry started after her, remembered his promise and halted.

"Won't you hurry with that telephone call?" he said to Harbison. "And please don't forget about the razor."

That dazed gentleman did as he was bid. Harbison knew the fame of Johnson, Johnson & Johnson, and he was properly impressed by the excitement which his—to him—rather cryptic message caused. He had to assure the senior partner again and again that the young man, now upstairs struggling with a beard that had thought it was there to stay, was indeed safe and well and that the Boston Post Road and an offshoot was the quickest route to Cove Cottage.

WHEN he had hung up the receiver, Harbison went into the library and sat down with the caution of one who suspects he may turn out to be made of something else than he had always supposed. He didn't try to think. He just gave it up.

San Loo, quite without orders, investigated Harbison's wardrobe while Lowry shaved, and the latter had no reluctance in accepting the offerings of a clean shirt and a presentable suit of clothes which the Chinese boy presented. The improvement was striking. Lowry approved of himself and had a most natural instinct to seek out Sonia at once and prove that her husband to be wasn't such a bad looking fellow after all. But no—that must wait. And, anyway, the rattling and snorting of Patchy proclaimed that Sonia was removing temptation from at least one person and very likely two.

So Lowry went for another walk along the beach and Harbison ate lunch in solitary state, served skilfully by San Loo; though San Loo alone was aware of that. That such a thing as lunch hour existed was apparently forgotten entirely by Sonia and her lover.

But they were equally anxious for the lawyer's arrival and both appeared from somewhere near when the big car was heard roaring down the hill. It had broken the speed laws of all places eastward from Cove Cottage, left motorcycle cops wondering what was wrong with their machines as they swore mightily and jotted down a fast disappearing license number.

Yet it was a most dignified Mr. Johnson who presented himself to the group gathered on the veranda. To be sure, his eyes glistened with a suspicion of moisture as he grasped Lowry's hand with a, "You had us worried, Bob." But he was all grave courtesy as he acknowledged the introductions to Sonia and her father. When they were finished, Lowry said quietly:

"And now, John, I want you to introduce me to Miss Harbison. She has promised to marry me, but we have never been properly introduced and it seems rather important that we should be. You see, sir, she doesn't even know my name."

Startled as she was, Sonia caught the emphasis laid on the concluding sentence. Harbison noted the glow of satisfaction that lighted up the lawyer's face.

With a quick grasp of Lowry's hand and a hearty, "Congratulations, Bob!" he turned to Sonia. Bowing low, with old fashioned courtesy, he said:

"Miss Harbison, allow me to present Mister Robert Lowry Merton."

The name meant little to Sonia. Somewhere she had heard of people named Merton, she thought. But to her father it carried the announcement that the young man before him was heir to one of the great fortunes of the world.

Robert had drawn Sonia to his side when the formality was completed.

"Doesn't mean much to you, dear, does it?" he said.

"No, Robert, I don't understand yet what this is all about."

"It means," interposed Mr. Johnson, "that since a certain curious provision of the will of Robert Lowry Merton, Senior, has been complied with, the wife of the present Robert Lowry Merton will have everything that is meant by money and position. In short, that you, my dear, have promised to marry one of the richest young men in America."

Sonia smiled back at the old man and shook her head.

"I know it's all very important, and of course it's very nice. I just don't quite grasp it yet. But it is *most* important to me that I'm going to marry Robert Lowry. He's a first class motor mechanic and besides that, I adore him. It merely doesn't spoil that much to have to add Merton and money."

The person who was adored patted the hand he found within his arm and took up the tale.

"As for the mystery I seemed to throw about myself, the answer is painful but simple. My father met and married my mother when they were both very young and when father was only moderately well-to-do. I have been told that they were happy as few are, in complete understanding and love. My mother died when I was too young to remember her. For ten years after that, my father turned to the business of making money with a fierce energy and determination.

"Then, when I was fifteen, father married again. He was by that time almost a social recluse just from loneliness. I understand he was flattered by the apparent interest and sympathy of a woman who knew how to present ambition as love. After they were married, father found that out, as he inevitably would. Money and the power of money had never given him much satisfaction. But he had hoped that life with this beautiful and clever woman would mean regaining some measure of happiness. He found himself cheated. There was no scandal, but the second Mrs. Merton spent most of her time abroad. When my father died, two years after his marriage, there was a provision in his will placing his entire estate, aside from adequate maintenance for his wife, in trust for me, to become mine upon my marriage —but only if the woman I married had accepted me without knowing my identity.

"And so you see," he concluded, "when I met and fell in love with Sonia, I had my choice of keeping from her my real identity or of having to ask her to marry an almost penniless young man."

The little group was silent for a moment when Robert had finished. Then Johnson cleared his throat and was beginning:

"And now, Mr. Harbison, about . . ."

Robert drew Sonia towards the steps.

"Let's leave them to get rid of the troubles of the poor old *Sea Lass* and the rest," he said. "We've got such important matters to discuss."

And presently they were seated once more in the shelter of the great rock, quite as happy as though they were any other two young lovers without a cent or a care in the world. They didn't return until the early setting October sun was throwing long shadows from the dunes.

Harbison and Johnson had settled, to their own satisfaction, the problems connected with the voyage of the ill fated schooner. Harbison's friend Elton Hill, of the Secret Service, was to be taken into their counsels next day, and with his aid Johnson believed the whole matter could be placed before the authorities without being made public. As for the *Sea Lass's* treasure box, Johnson would make an effort to learn if Erickson and Swansen had left dependents, and if so, the money would be used for their benefit. If none was found, it would be given to charity.

After dinner, Johnson left for a more dignified progress back to town and Sonia and Robert found an irresistible appeal in the full harvest moon that was rising over the Long Island hills across the Sound. They had so much to say to each other, and there were so many interruptions to the saying, that Harbison had been long abed and getting his first peaceful sleep in weeks when they returned to the cottage. As they were saying one more good night, Sonia was struck with a sudden thought. She pointed an accusing finger.

"Did you, or did you not inform me that you worked in an airplane shop on Long Island? You haven't explained that piece of deception, sir. I thought of you as a really interesting greaseball and now I must put up with just a rich young man."

Robert laughed.

"No deception at all, and I'll tell you all about that tomorrow. But, great scott!" He stared at Sonia with a dawning grin. "I've forgotten all about Mike."

He picked up the telephone and said into it:

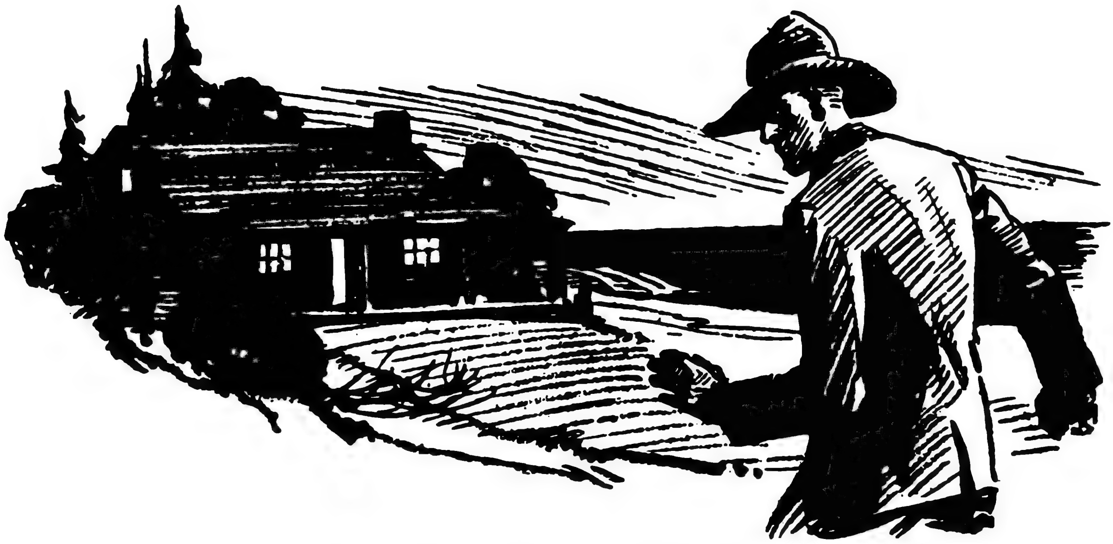
"Western Union."

Sitting down and depositing the instrument on the table, he used his free arm to pull Sonia to him and she listened while he got a sleepy telegrapher to take a message to Mr. Micheal Doherty, Airdrome, Key West:

"Leave the old sky boat and take the first train home. You'll be just in time for the wedding."

MONTANA MAN

Here is a Swift and Stirring Story of the West



By OSCAR E. JENSEN

FROM the shelter of a doorway on Occidental Avenue, Tom Hagedorn looked out on the lower business district of Seattle. Gazing listlessly from under the rim of a broad brimmed Stetson, he studied the heaped up grayness of the Smith Building tower.

A bead string curtain of rain, tangled and snarled by a playful April wind, distorted the lines of the towering structure. The rain, together with a gnawing hunger, distorted as well, Tom's outlook on the present, on the future and on all things having to do with existence. He was broke. Because of being broke far from his home range, he was acutely miserable and unhappy.

For over three years, Tom had nursed a secret ambition to show himself to Seattle. While riding for the Diamond B outfit during its closing days and final round-up on the Montana range, he had allowed his mind to become obsessed by this one fixed idea. In all his twenty-five years of living no other thought had so completely absorbed him. With the dissolution of the Diamond B outfit because of the fencing in of much of its old-time range, his opportunity had come.

Well over six feet in height, broad shouldered, straight as an arrow excepting for legs bowed from too much gripping of a saddle while topping off frost chilled broncos in his capacity of bronc twister for various Montana outfits, Tom had believed himself a gladsome sight for hungry city eyes.

That is, he *had* believed himself such. He had failed to take into consideration the possibility that Seattle eyes might be fed up with primitive types: with sourdough Alaskans, Indians, Eskimos, loggers, and with a plethora of cow hands and wranglers like himself.

On arriving, a casual acquaintance had offered to guide him to a speakeasy. When, in the dingy basement joint to which he had been escorted, Tom had endeavored to prove himself a regular fellow by recounting his experiences with outlaw horses, with badmen, and with bad liquor, he had succeeded only in proving himself a sucker. Someone had frisked him of his bank roll during the profound insensibility that had followed his third drink of raw whisky.

Now, in the shelter of a doorway, and in humbleness and contrition of spirit, he studied the heaped up grayness of the tower and likened it to his own towering misery.

Absent-mindedly hitching up his belt as he shifted his thoughts to things more practical and material, he lowered his gaze and hungrily watched the converging of the noon hour crowd at the entrance to a restaurant situated across the street from where he was loitering. He could not recall a time when he had been so miserably hungry. Except for a cup of coffee the morning before, he hadn't had a mouthful of food for two days. And that cup of coffee had taken his last nickel.

His view of the restaurant entrance was obstructed for a moment or two by a luxurious and brilliantly nickeled landau. He was dimly conscious of the fact that the landau had, only a short time before, rolled leisurely along in the foreground of his outlook. A flashing gleam from the radiator, reflecting the sun as it abruptly peeked through a rift in the clouds, may have caused him to now give careful attention to the car and to its two occupants. And he was aware of the critical scrutiny its occupants turned upon him. The driver was even hazarding a collision in order to keep him in sight. A sleek, fat looking man was studiously gazing at him from his place in the back seat of the landau.

Tom squared his broad shoulders and pushed back his Stetson from his forehead, as the fat man turned to look back at him through the oblong pane of glass in the back of the landau. Tom did his best to register wild and woolly West. With sinking heart he watched the landau turn the corner and disappear from sight.

He walked uncertainly to the curb, paused and stood irresolutely deliberating upon which way to go. He looked toward the corner around which the landau had disappeared. The rain had stopped and the wet pavement glistened now with a mirrorlike sheen in the brilliant noon sunlight. His utter lack of any definite objective made any decision difficult, and Tom slowly retraced his steps, looking again toward the restaurant.

A feeling of panic was slowly gripping him. The outlook was indeed unpromising. Every outfit for which he had worked was now out of business. A grim line, half smile and half sneer, marked the tightening of his lips as he realized that he had probably taken part in his last round-up.

THERE seemed to be nothing ahead but drudgery and the commonplace. He felt strangely out of place in the attire on which he had lavished so much thought. For the first time since he had arrived in Seattle he was pleased that Seattle had paid so little attention to him.

He had made up his mind to cross the street and apply at the restaurant for a dishwashing job when the landau, coming in sight around the corner, rolled noiselessly to the curb and stopped. The driver was alone in the car. Wigwagging with a forefinger, emphasized by a backward nod of his head, the driver beckoned Tom to the curb.

"Broke?" said the driver.

"Down to the grass roots," answered Tom.

"Wait here," the driver ordered. "Got to phone," he said crisply. He left the car and hurried into a near-by card room. Upon his return he suggested to Tom that he go across the street and fill up at the restaurant. He handed Tom a five dollar bill. "Hurry back," he urged. "There's a piece of money in it for you."

Having the Indian's and the plainsman's habit of eating while there was food before him, Tom gorged himself. When he could no longer swallow another mouthful, he sauntered contentedly to the curb. He looked with something of bewilderment up and down the street. The landau was nowhere in sight.

"Oh, well," he thought, "what's the difference? One job, more or less, in a city the size of Seattle!"

Somehow, things did not look so discouraging now. There must still be big outfits running cattle somewhere in this broad land. He decided that he didn't want a job in Seattle after all.

He was thinking of horses and the open ranges when he heard a sharp whistle—such a whistle as one might utter in calling a dog. Then, from out the corner of his eye, he caught a signal from the man who had been driving the landau. The man was now impatiently beckoning. He was standing near a coupé whose lines suggested almost limitless power. The coupé had been drawn up to the curb bordering the walk on which Tom stood, and was removed from him by two or three cars parked between him and the corner. When Tom had reached the car and was seated, the man, impatiently grabbing the wheel, swung the car into the stream of traffic. He seemed intolerant of delays; moreover, he seemed grouchy and ill tempered.

After respecting for as long a time as possible the driver's moody silence, Tom asked:

"Where we goin'?"

The driver deigned no reply. Casting about for some plausible explanation of the driver's surliness, Tom remembered the change from the five dollar bill. He dug down into his pocket and fished it out.

"Here's the change from the five spot," he said.

"Keep it," barked the driver. Then, after a sullen pause, he added: "There's plenty more where that came from."

They had reached the north limits of Seattle before Tom again concerned himself with their destination. As the car leaped out along the county highway, he shifted his gaze from the blurry landscape and looked thoughtfully at the driver.

"Listen, pardner," he demanded, "jes' where we headin' fer?"

Ahead of them the highway seemed to come to an abrupt end at the foot of a wooded knoll. The trees of the knoll seemed to be hungrily rushing toward them. The driver speeded up the car before replying.

"Lots o' places," he ambiguously answered. Then, contemptuously, asked: "Gettin' scared?"

"Hell, no!" snorted Tom. "I ain't scairt o' nothin'. I've bin honin' fer a bit of excitement. An' the way you're burnin' up what's left o' this here road, it looks to me like we'ed be meetin' up with it pretty pronto." As if grabbing for a saddlehorn, he instinctively reached forward when, on two wheels, the car negotiated the sharp turn.

The driver glanced scornfully to Tom.

"How long've you been in Seattle?" he asked.

"Come two weeks Monday."

"Where you from?" The driver gave his attention to his rear vision mirror as they entered another straightaway stretch of pavement.

"Montana," gasped Tom, the rushing car deflecting the wind as they rounded a shoulder of rock.

"What brought you to Seattle?" There was something more pointed in the questioning. The driver's voice betrayed something of tension. "Got folks here?" he asked, giving to the words a peculiar emphasis.

Tom shook his head.

"Nah," he grunted. "My folks lives back East some'eres. Montana starved 'em out. I stuck it out. Bin twistin' broncs fer diff'rent outfits. Las' place I set in was with the Diamond B. Know the outfit?"

"No." The ejaculation was sharply emphatic. Again the driver lapsed into moody silence.

THEY turned from the highway and followed a dirt road running in a westerly direction and forming a right angle with the main highway. Fringed by sapling alders that seemed to rush toward the rapidly moving car in a veritable shower of new foliage, the road appeared to come to a point at the crest of a distant hill.

As the car topped the hill, a flash of silver was visible through the aisle of trees lining the road ahead—Puget Sound.

They reached a road intersection. The driver turned northerly and followed a little traveled road for a distance. He drove slowly because of the road's being puncheoned and exceedingly rough. At a forking in this makeshift road he turned toward the Sound, coming finally to a place where the road widened and ended abruptly near the edge of a cliff. Standing alongside of the wider portion of the road, its wheels resting deep in a thick growth of matted salal bushes and ferns, was the landau that Tom had first seen on Occidental Avenue. The landau was unoccupied, headed away from the cliff, and apparently ready for instant departure.

Paying no more attention to the landau than caution required in the limited turning space, the driver, after a series of jerky backings and twistings, swung his car around and headed it back along the road. He stopped the car in the main roadway, allowing the engine to idle. Gruffly ordering Tom to remain in the car, he leaped to the road and plunged into a thicket of spiræa bushes that bordered the roadway on the north.

A quiver of apprehension sent a warming glow along Tom's spine. He was, however, far from being frightened. He enjoyed the thrill of the uncertain waiting. He greedily opened and closed his big, horn calloused hands. Here, he felt, was promise of something worth while. Almost anything might happen. He eagerly looked forward to developments.

Then, growing impatient and recalling the gruffness that had marked the driver's order that he remain in the car, Tom stepped out on the roadway. He stretched leisurely, yawned comfortably, and walked to the edge of the cliff.

From there, he could see a broad meadow which extended from the foot of the hill below him to the Sound. Several horses seemed knee deep in the meadow growth, only their bodies being visible from the height on which Tom was stationed.

Near the edge of the meadow was a small, squat, frame cottage. Farther on stood a large barn and two or three smaller outbuildings. To the south was a considerable cluster of houses.

Something stirred deep down inside of Tom. He had often dreamt of a place as beautiful as this.

HE WAS abruptly startled out of his reverie by a hand that roughly caught his arm and pulled him backward before he could turn to inquire its purpose.

"What the hell?" he demanded, angrily swinging around.

"Get back from there," a surly voice ordered. The man who had spoken was stepping backward a pace or two from the edge of the cliff. He was huge. He suggested something apelike as he stood with slouching shoulders; his hands, big and meaty, dangling well in front of his knees. His prognathous jaw was thrust belligerently forward. From under beetling brows darkly smoldering eyes peered out between puffy, narrowed lids. He seemed poised as if to spring. There was, in his crouching attitude, something sinister, something terrible.

Tom immediately recognized him as the man whom he had seen in the back of the landau.

"Come away from there, I tell you," the big man growled.

"Try an' make me," Tom snarled. "What's the big idea of jerkin' me around like that?"

"Keep away from the edge of the cliff till I get through talkin' with you." In the man's voice was something between a plea and a growl. "I've got a proposition to make to you."

"Then," Tom barked back, "make it like you was makin' it to a white man." He stepped lightly away from the cliff edge. "An' don't look so damned grumpy," he continued. His blue eyes blazed as he awaited some reply. "Who the hell did you think you're talkin' to—a sheep herder?" He sniffed contemptuously. "You ain't scarin' nobody."

"That'll do," the man interrupted. Then, apparently striving to modulate the tone of his voice, he added, "There's fifty dollars in it for you if you do as I say."

"I won't do it fer fifty," Tom growled.

"How the hell do you know you won't?" The man's body swayed forward. He gave the impression that if he moved farther, it would be by springing on his knuckles. "You don't even know what I want done."

" 'Cause anything you'd ask a man to do is worth more money. Jes' to haf'ta look at your ugly mug is worth more'n that."

"How much do you want?"

"What's your scheme?"

"You've seen that cottage down there on the flat," the man said quizzically.

Tom nodded.

"There's an old cattleman living down there."

"The hell!" exclaimed Tom, his expression brightening and his blue eyes showing less of the steely glint. "What the hell's he doin' in this part o' the country?"

"Runnin' a home for busted-down horses, I guess," the man answered sneeringly. "He's got a bunch of old nags that he's babyin' along like a prize race string."

Tom laughed.

"Pensioned off his remuda, eh? Snap into it," he chuckled, "an' git your proposition off'n your chest. I'm ramblin' down pronto an' sayin' howdy to this ol' captain."

"I want him out of there tonight," the man advised abruptly.

"Want him out of there?" Tom asked

dazedly. "Jes' what do you mean, huh?"

"Exactly what I said," the man answered tersely. "I want him out of that cottage when it gets dark, and I want him kept out of there until I'm ready to have him come back."

"An' how long will that be?"

"Until midnight," the man said bruskly. Then, more slowly and thoughtfully, "Maybe later."

Tom frowningly shook his head.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded. "What are you plannin' on doin'? An' how will the ol' captain's bein' in the shack snarl up your nighthawkin'?"

The man held up a restraining hand.

"Do you want the job?" he parried. "And the fifty dollars?"

"I don't even know what I'm s'posed to do fer the said fifty," Tom said hesitantly. "This ol' captain don't git hurt, does he, nor nothin' like that?"

"Hell, no!" The man shrugged his shoulders. "All you do," he said throatily, "is to walk with him to Oak Landing. And you keep him there until I've finished a bit of business I've got on tonight. And," he added menacingly, "you keep your mouth shut."

"Where's Oak Landing?"

"That's the town you see off to the south." The man pointed in the general direction of the roof tops showing above the trees. He restlessly shifted his gross bulk from one foot to the other, impatiently awaiting Tom's decision.

"I cain't see nothin' wrong with it, pardner," Tom said after carefully deliberating upon the matter. "I got it figger'd out you're wantin' to land somethin' on that beach down there. But," he hastily added, "that ain't none o' my funeral. I'll ride herd on this ol' captain," he concluded in a hard, dry voice, "fer a hundred dollars."

"I'll pay you seventy-five; no more," the man said.

Tom shook his head.

"All right, damn it, I'll make it a hundred." He drew a roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off a couple of twenties and a ten and handed them to Tom.

"This ain't a hundred," Tom said, scornfully offering a return of the money.

The man grudgingly counted off other bills and passed them over.

"I was aiming to pay you the balance later," he said.

Tom grinningly pocketed the currency, cramming it deep in a pocket of his pants.

"Cash down," he laughed. "Now how do I go about ridin' herd on the old captain of the barnyard?"

"Now listen!" There was a tenseness in the man's voice. "You go on down the trail to the cottage. I'll show you the trail in a minute. Tell this old-timer you're lookin' for a family by the name of Bardgren. They used to live back here apiece. They've moved away."

"Yeah," Tom quizzically interrupted. "An' what am I wantin' o' these Bardgrens?"

"That's up to you," the man snarled. "Make up a story."

"Oh," Tom laughed. "Tha's easy."

"I'm figuring this old codger will ask you to stay all night. He lives alone down there, and he probably gets lonesome."

"Tha's reasonable enuff." Tom tilted his sombrero forward and thoughtfully scratched the back of his head. "What's this hombre's name—this captain o' the barnyard?"

"Compton."

"Never heard tell of 'im," Tom mused.

The man leaned eagerly forward.

"He was mixed up in a Wyoming killing," he said in a throaty whisper. He hurriedly drew back as if striving for a better vantage point from which to watch Tom's reaction to this information.

"I ain't never rode in Wyoming," Tom said, carelessly indifferent to the information. "What's this Bardgren's first name?"

"Andrew."

"Thanks. Now s'posin' this ol' captain ain't honin' fer a trip to Oak Landing. What then?"

"Now," the man urged, "listen close. Along about dark—the tide will be in then—you're supposed to meet a friend in Oak Landing."

"Who's this said friend?"

"The man who drove you out here will be at the pool room in Oak Landing at nine o'clock."

"What's the tide got to do with it?"

"Why," the man stammered slightly. "Uh! Why! Oh, yes! You'll not be able to walk along the beach. I'm figuring this old codger will offer to walk with you through the woods. You insist on it. Tell him you don't savvy the woods. If he goes with you, suggest a li'l poker game at the pool room."

"Who all sits in the game?" Tom asked.

"Your friend—the chap who drove you out here—for one. There'll be others hanging around." The man caught the frowning gleam in Tom's eyes. "Oh," he hurriedly explained, "the game will be on the level. And now listen. If he starts out with his gun—he's got a gun with a barrel as big as a spoke in that wheel there—you kid him out of carrying it."

"Nope!" Tom shook his head. "I ain't tellin' nobody shall they carry their shootin' iron or not."

Clearly nonplused by Tom's emphatic attitude, the man stood irresolutely shifting his weight from one foot to the other. There was in the movement something of a suggestion of getting poised for a forward lunge or of building up momentum to make the lunge all destructive. Finally, after a long pause, he said:

"Do I have to tell you we're landing something on the beach tonight?"

"You don't have to tell me nothing," Tom replied, enunciating his words with more than usual care. "You an' me has struck a bargain. I'm to walk with this ol' barnyard captain to Oak Landing. I'm to keep him there till—say!" Tom suddenly paused. "How do I know when you've finished this said bit o' business you're plannin' on?"

"That's just what I'm getting to." A fleeting expression of relief crossed the man's darkly scowling face. For a brief moment it hovered, then gave place to another scowl. "Your friend—the chap over there—will have a speed boat at the dock in Oak Landing. When he tells you it's time to go, you beat it with him."

"Nope! Not till I sees the ol' captain safe at the home ranch."

The man's face grew purple with illy suppressed rage.

"Damn you and your captain!" he cursed. He sputteringly stammered something about seeing Tom in hell, interspersed with something resembling a demand for the return of the hundred dollars. Then suddenly he grew calmer.

"That's all right. That's all right. You can see him home, and may he kiss you goodnight." He laughed evilly as Tom's face broke into a wide grin. "I don't want him busting in on me with that big cannon of his. That's why I told you to kid him out of carrying it. If he finds me on his beach, I want time to make a get-away. Have you got a gun?" he interjected somewhat anxiously.

"Nah! I had to hock my gun to git eatin' money."

"Then be a good fellow," the man pleaded. "See that he leaves his gun at home."

"We-ell," Tom drawled, "I'll do my best." He thoughtfully rubbed his stubbly chin. "An' if this ol'-timer don't suggest my bunkin' in the shack———"

"Don't worry about that," the man interrupted. "Your friend will take you back to Seattle in the speed boat. There'll be plenty to drink aboard the boat when you pull out. And he'll throw a real party for you when you hit Seattle. He knows 'em all, if you make me."

Tom's eyes glistened. Then, slowly, they narrowed down to fiery pin points.

"Nope," he growled. "I set in with one bunch in Seattle. The hombre what rode circle on me that night was goin' to show 'em all to me—light an' dark. Nope!" His head shook in a gesture of finality. "I didn't know nothin' till the next afternoon. I'm offen the likker an' I'm not hankerin' fer no wimmin."

"This will be different. They—" The man suddenly checked himself.

"Yeah!" Tom coldly studied the man's face. The conviction was somehow forced upon him that this man may have had something to do with his being drugged and robbed during his first evening in Seattle. Then, in a flash, he sensed the possible connection between the earlier invitation to visit the speakeasy and the proposition this man was now making to him—a proposition acceptable only because of his straitened financial circumstances. He was, by now, convinced that the man who stood before him was a rum runner. These rum runners, he thought, certainly planned their campaigns most thoroughly. His only reaction to his conclusions was a regret that he hadn't held out for more money. He concluded that there must be a fortune in a cargo of whisky. He would, he decided, see what could be done about getting something more for himself.

"I'll show you the trail," the man said abruptly.

Tom walked dazedly through the spiræa thicket to a point where a clearly defined trail led down toward the lower bench.

"Don't forget what I've told you," urged the man as he turned to go back through the thicket to where the cars were standing. "And don't forget that you've got a hundred dollars in your pocket that belongs to me if you don't make good."

As Tom started down the trail, he heard the man mutter:

"And be damn sure I'll somehow get it back if you don't come through."

IGNORING the switchbacks along the trail on the steep hillside, Tom slid down the almost precipitous gravelly cliff, reached the timbered bench, and worked his way through a tangle of undergrowth at the edge of the meadow. As he crossed the meadow, the sleek, overly fat horses, all branded Circle C, looked up inquiringly at him. One roan gelding insisted on following him to the cottage.

As Tom reached out his hand to knock on the back door of the cottage, the door seemed to fall away from him as it was abruptly pulled open by a grizzled, stoop shouldered, elderly man who surlily demanded to know what was wanted. The sudden, almost uncanny opening of the door and the man's grouchy manner confused Tom. He found it less easy than he had imagined to speak the little piece he had framed in his mind as he approached the cottage. Finally he blurted out:

"Are you Andy Bardgren?"

The man's hard, suspicious expression perceptibly softened. He was critically studying Tom's attire. A faint glimmer of approval showed in his eyes.

"What do you want o' Bardgren?" he asked.

"He owns some grazin' land on the Greenrock range in Montana," answered Tom. "I'm tryin' to locate 'im so's to buy his land."

"Then you know I ain't Bardgren, don't ye?" the man chuckled. "An' I think yo're a damned liar, to boot." He watched, with unconcealed joy, Tom's utter confusion. "Where you bin ridin'?" he chuckled. "You shore ain't lookin' to set in with no outfits round about here nowheres, be you?" he demanded. He pugnaciously stuck a square chin toward Tom. The muscles of his scrawny neck were pulled taut.

"Ain't you got no store clothes?" he snarlingly concluded as he made a motion as if to close the door.

"Calm yourself," soothingly replied Tom. "An' don't git personal. I jes' pulled out o' the Diamond B, where I've bin top hand bronc twister fer goin' on four seasons. I ain't aimin' to set in nowhere's whiles't I've got so'thin' in my pocket. An' as fer my clothes, I'll wear a Indian blanket if I chooses, an' no apology to you nor nobody else. An' I'll say this in leavin'." Tom took a step or two back from the doorway. "If yore name's Bardgren—an' I don't know, nor I don't give a damn whether it is or not—I'm tellin' you that you're meaner'n any badger I ever see, an' what's more, you an' me ain't doin' no business together at all."

The old man leaned back and roared boisterously.

"Come on in," he laughed, "an' set a while." Tears were glistening in his gray eyes. "I'll tell you, pilgrim," he chuckled. "I figger'd you was one of the booze runners that's everlastin'ly wantin' to run booze in on my beach. I ain't Bardgren, an' I ain't callin' you no liar nor nothin' like that. My name's Compton. Circle C was my ol' brand." He pointed toward a wall in the dim interior of the cottage. "Tha's my ol' iron hangin' there on that peg." He seemed on the point of waxing garrulous. "Yessir, pilgrim, the Circle C. My range was from the Rattlesnake Buttes to the Greasewood Bottoms."

As Tom entered the cottage, Compton rambled on:

"Poor ol' Andy Bardgren's dropped out o' sight. He was a wuthless cuss, Andy was. I don't think he ever owned nothin' nowheres. Seems like he got into some mess with the booze runners. I ain't seen him fer goin' on a month. I think he set in with the runners an' skipped out. Sit down, pilgrim," he urged. "Take a load offen yore boots."

Tom took the proffered chair. He studied the furnishings of the single room of the cottage. With eager interest he noted the articles hanging from pegs on the walls or strewn about in the corners. He could almost believe that he had been transported back to the tiny room of the foreman's cottage on the Diamond B. Everywhere were evidences of Compton's old calling and of his love for the things which have to do with horses and riding. Coiled ropes hung from pegs. Chaps, holsters, and *tapaderos* hung from other pegs. On the top of a small dresser in a near-by corner lay a pair of worn, horsehide gauntlets with the design of the Circle C worked in a fancy silk scroll on the fringed cuff.

What most intrigued Tom was a six-shooter that lay on a table. A box of cartridges lay near the gun. Oiled rags, an oil can, and a screw driver, together with a half dozen loose cartridges, were scattered about on the table. It was evident that Compton had been cleaning and oiling the gun when interrupted by Tom's step on the loose gravel of the path leading to the door.

Apparently noticing Tom's interest in the gun, and breaking in somewhat abruptly on his flow of inconsequential chatter, Compton said:

"I've jes' played hell with my ol' cannon."

"How's that?" asked Tom. He rose from the chair and walked to the table. He picked up the heavy gun, balanced it in his hand, and critically studied it. "Looks fit enough to me," he said.

The gun, a Colt's Frontier, was an old-timer with a barrel fully eight inches long, and seemed in perfect condition. Tom carefully examined it, tested each working part, and laid it back on the table.

Compton reached for the gun.

"Look-a here," he said. He pointed to the firing pin as he pulled the hammer back. The point of the firing pin was faintly blunted, presenting, on close examination, a silvered appearance. "The danged metal's crystallized," continued Compton. "I sheared off the end o' the firing pin with the cylinder."

"Won't she shoot?" asked Tom.

Compton sadly shook his head. He held the gun against the light after letting the hammer down. Only the tiniest fragment of the broken firing pin, like the extreme tip of a needle point, showed between the cylinder and the frame.

"Not till I git me a new hammer, she won't," he said. "The pin don't connect with the cap."

"Oh, well," Tom said consolingly, truly pleased that this phase of his mission was so conveniently taken care of, "what's the diff'rence? You don't have no need fer a gun round these parts."

"No?" queried Compton. His gray eyes glittered menacingly. "But I'm calc'latin' to have need o' this ol' cannon some day soon."

"Yeah," drawled Tom. Then, with increasing interest, "How's that?"

"Oh, jes' trespassers, tha's all," Compton answered ambiguously.

"Trespassers, humph!" growled Tom. "Tha's all I've bin seein' all day. 'No trespassin' signs. We rode fer miles along a road tha's bordered by woods, an' durn near every tree had a sign on it. 'No Trespassing'. I'm sick of it."

"You'd be a damned sight sicker if you owned beach property," Compton growled.

"How's that?"

"Booze runners."

"Havin' trouble with 'em?"

"Trouble!" snorted Compton. "I shore had plenty till I had the telephone run down here. An' last fall," he chuckled, "I phoned the Fed'ral officers jes' as Thagler was unloadin' a cargo o' booze, an' they scooped up Thagler's whole crew." He laughed a dry, cackling laugh as the memory of his coup convulsed him.

Tom leaned eagerly forward.

"What sort of a looking man is Thagler?" he asked.

"I never seen 'im," answered Compton. "I heard 'em unloadin' their stuff on the beach an' I phoned Wilkinson, the Fed'ral chief. He caught 'em as they was comin' into th' highway with their booze loaded in a train o' trucks. I see by the papers it was Thagler they caught. It seems Thagler was the big fellow in the rum runnin'. He used to be a prize fighter, so the paper said."

"Did he go to jail?"

"Did he?" chortled Compton. "Did he?" Compton leaned back and laughed joyfully. "He got a year on the Island an' a ten thousan' dollar fine."

"I wouldn't 'a' did that," Tom said reprovingly.

"I don't give a damn what you'd 'a' did," shouted Compton. "This is my property. I own the beach an' I own the tide lands."

"What've you got ag'in likker?" Tom hurriedly asked.

"Nothin'! Not a damn thing! But when they go runnin' their trucks across't the meadow at night, it scares the hosses. Them's the last o' the Circle C hosses, an' while there's one o' them left, they ain't a-goin' to be stampeded at night by a lot o' roarin' likker trucks. They was put here to dream o' the days on th' range, an' to be where they could see plenty o' water—which was damn'd scarce on our range—an' I ain't intendin' to let nothin' spoil their fun."

Tom guiltily felt of the crumpled currency in his pocket. He looked out the back window, through which he could see the roan gelding dozing lazily in the shade cast by the cottage. The old gelding had one ear pricked up as if eavesdropping. To relieve his growing embarrassment, he groped about for something to say.

"An' you're expectin' trouble from Thagler," he said. "Sort o' figgerin' he'll try an' git even when he gits out o' the pen?"

"Not exactly that," Compton answered, "but jes' about. The las' time I see Andy Bardgren, he tells me that Thagler is plannin' to celebrate his gittin' out by runnin' in the biggest load o' booze that's ever bin brought down through the Straits. An' Wilkinson dropped in on me one day durin' th' winter, an' he tol' me he's lookin' to me to keep my beach clean."

"Clean?"

"Yeah! To keep the runners fr'm landin' here. It's the only stretch o' beach where they kin come close in durin' high tide. There's deep water jes' a short ways out."

"An' you're watchin' 'em, eh?" chuckled Tom.

"I shore am. I used to run down to Oak Landing once't or twice a month an' play poker, but I've bin stickin' close to home."

"When do you figger Thagler will be out?"

"Damn' if I know! I ain't worryin' none."

"Ain't you afraid o' Thagler? Ain't you scairt he'll maybe plug you?"

"Hell, no! Wilkinson tol' me that if anything happened to me, they'd hang Thagler jes' on suspicion, an' he says he tol' Thagler the same thing after the trial. Thagler knows I was the one that give the tip to Wilkinson, an' tha's why he sent Andy Bardgren to me to tell about the big load he was figgerin' on landin' on my beach."

"Did Bardgren know Thagler?"

"Shore he knew 'im. But Bardgren liked me, even if I did tell 'im he was no 'count, an' th' las' time I see 'im he seemed worried an' he tol' me he was goin' to jine up with me. I ain't seen 'im since."

"Well," said Tom, recalling the ruse he had employed when first meeting Compton, "I guess there ain't much chance o' my runnin' across't this man Bardgren. I'll be hittin' the trail."

"If I see Andy, I'll tell 'im you was askin' fer 'im, but I guess there ain't much chance o' my seein' 'im," Compton said, laboriously rising to his feet. "My kidneys," he explained as he noted that Tom was sympathetically watching his painful efforts. "Too much ridin'." He again picked up the thread of his earlier remark. "I guess Andy Bardgren's done fer. They was whisperin' aroun' the pool room down at Oak Landin' that Andy's bin took fer a ride in a speed boat."

"A ride in a speed boat," Tom gasped. "How could that hurt 'im? Did he git wrecked?"

"Oh," calmly answered Compton, "tha's jes' a sayin'. When Thagler gits through with a man, they say, 'He took 'im ridin' in a speed boat'." Compton slumped limply down into a cushioned rocker. The sharply etched lines of his face betrayed the pain from which he suffered.

Suddenly all of Tom's sympathies were aroused. There was something so helpless in the old man's gesture as his hand dropped weakly toward the floor; something so appealing in the entire situation—the cottage with its pathetic collection of riding and range paraphernalia, the worn out range horses fattening in the meadow—that his heart went unrestrainedly out to Compton.

"Have you had your dinner?" he asked.

Compton shook his head.

Tom stepped toward a tiny cupboard. "I'll fix you up some real bait," he laughed. "Something that will make you think you're grazin' off th' end board of a pie wagon."

As Tom busied himself with preparations for the meal which must combine dinner with supper, it being late afternoon, he hummed an old tune.

Compton gropingly strove to attune his voice to Tom's. Presently they were lustily singing:

"Run in your pony closer an' I'll tell to
you the tale

Of Utah Carl, my pardner, an' our las'
ride on the trail;
'Mid the sagebrush an' the mesquite of
Mexico's fair land."

"Hey," yelled Compton. "That sh'd be, 'Mid the sagebrush an' the greasewood o' fair Wyomin's land.'"

"A'right," laughed Tom, "le's go."

"Where the cattle roam in thousands, an'
of many a herd an' brand,
There's a grave without a headstone, an
without a date nor name.
There lies my pardner, sleepin' in the land
from which I came."

"Boy, howdy!" yelled Compton.

AS THE evening shadows lengthened, Tom was on the verge, several times, of telling Compton the truth concerning the unusual circumstances which had brought him to the cottage. Compton seemed so happy, however, to have him as a guest that Tom was loath to betray his real mission. Gradually there came to him a feeling that he would be doing the old man a real favor through taking him to Oak Landing and allowing Thagler—if it should be true, as he surmised, that Thagler was the man who had made the proposition to him—to load his trucks on Compton's beach and have the satisfaction of bringing in the big cargo of liquor he had threatened to bring in.

The man had shown no disposition to injure Compton. He had made it emphatically clear that he wanted the affair carried through without any shooting. Landing this one cargo might serve to alleviate Thagler's bitterness to Compton and make things easier for Compton in the future. It should be an easy matter, he figured, to lose the hundred dollars to Compton in a poker game at Oak Landing. Everything seemed absurdly simple. Such fright as the horses might experience when the trucks rolled down to the beach would be quickly forgotten. His conscience quit bothering him when he had devised a plan for getting rid of the hundred dollars that had lain like a leaden weight in his pocket.

They were sitting near a front window of the room which served as kitchen, living room, and bedroom. The sun was gradually dropping from sight behind the peaks of the Olympics. Compton had been reminiscing on the old days of the range. Suddenly he pointed out the window.

"Look-a there," he said feelingly. "Tha's the trail we've all got to take—the trail farther west. We'll all be takin' it some time."

For a moment, Tom did not grasp Compton's meaning, nor did he particularly notice what Compton was excitedly pointing out. Then, looking toward the setting sun, he noticed the trail-like definition of a brilliant beam of light on the water. As he studied it more closely, he noticed myriads of vague, indefinite shapes hurrying as if crowding one another in their haste to reach the distant shore. He was witnessing, for the first time, the marvelous beauty of a Puget Sound sunset.

Compton caught his breath sharply.

"See what I mean," he gasped in a half whisper. "See the ripples? Don't they look like millions o' tiny heads a-bobbin' up and down on th' water, an' all headin' west an' hurryin' like the Black Stallion o' the Divide was ridin' circle on 'em?"

"I guess I don't quite savvy," falteringly answered Tom.

"Don't you git what I mean?" Compton impatiently demanded. "They're people. Leastways tha's what I see in 'em. Millions o' people goin' west. Goin' farther west—out to where west ends. We'll all be takin' that trail, son." Compton leaned back resignedly in his chair. "An' the way I've bin a-feelin' lately, I figger I'm jes' about due to be hittin' that trail myself." He pressed his hands to his back, where toll was being taken for years of jolting in the saddle. "These burnin' pains," he softly breathed, "are from the runnin' iron o' the rider o' th' Black Stallion. He's cut me out an' he'll be foggin' me in with th' trail herd pronto."

"Forget it," said Tom, caressingly placing an arm over Compton's shoulder.

"I jes' cain't do it, son." Compton's frail figure relaxed as if comforted by the occasional stroking of his shoulder by Tom's firm hand. "Say," he said, excitedly straightening his body, "I've got it. You stay here with me, son. There's plenty o' money in the bank to keep us till all the fences is tore down from offen the range. An' when I've hit the herd trail where west ends, you look after the hosses. Then, when th' las' hoss has gone to jine my new remuda, you kin take the money—there's scads of it—an' you kin have jes' one hell of a time. What do you say, son?"

Tom glanced furtively down toward his pants, in a pocket of which the hundred dollars in currency lay like an immense, hot weight.

"I cain't do it, captain," he mumbled. He rose stumblingly from the chair and tenderly helped Compton to rise. "I've got to be pullin' out," he said with more emphasis. "A chap's meetin' me in Oak Landing." He glanced out to where the waters of the incoming tide caressed the beach below the cottage. "How do I git to this said Oak Landing?" he asked.

"I'll go on down there with you," volunteered Compton. "There's a trail through the timber. I'm needin' the exercise to limber up my back. An' maybe," he hesitantly suggested, "we kin scare up a li'l poker game in the pool room 'fore you go on back to Seattle."

Tom weakly demurred, but his objections were quickly overcome.

As they reached the trail leading through the grove of trees, Tom stopped in amazement. A great tree had long before fallen in the forest. From it a segment had been cut to permit passage along the trail that had been built through at that point. In the gathering dusk, Tom could only estimate the diameter of the log as shown by the exposed ends. It seemed fully eight feet through. Tom had never before seen such a stick of timber. It fascinated him. He was still expressing his wonder over the timber growth of western Washington when they stepped from the trail and out upon the stub end of a street leading into Oak Landing.

AT THE pool room, Tom found awaiting him the driver of the car that had brought him from Seattle. The driver was standing close to a box heater that stood near the side of the room. From where he stood he was enabled to command a view of everything that went on in the pool room, and he seemed to have deliberately selected his vantage point. He nodded curtly as Tom entered with Compton. Tom inclined his head toward the driver.

"Tha's my friend," he advised Compton.

Starting a little poker game in the pool room of Oak Landing required only the formality of calling for a deck of cards and the chips.

"You git the chips, son," Compton urged. "I'm always sittin' in tough luck if I calls fer the cards an' chips."

Chuckling and grinning, Tom stepped to the counter and asked for cards.

"Poker?" asked the proprietor.

Tom nodded.

As he reached under the counter for the poker chips, the proprietor leaned over, indicating by a slight jerk of his head that he wished to say something confidentially.

"I hope you're not makin' any trouble for ol' Compton," he said in a half whisper.

"We'll play the game," replied Tom.

"I mean," the proprietor whispered, "about that Wyoming trouble ol' Compton was mixed up in. While your friend was waiting, he tipped me off. He says you was puttin' the screws down on ol' Compton."

"What th' hell *you* talkin' about?" Tom hoarsely growled.

" 'Scuse me," the proprietor pleaded. "I didn't mean to butt in."

Glowering at the driver, Tom sauntered to a table where Compton and a couple of pool room idlers had seated themselves. The driver smiled cheerily and joined the group at the table.

For a while, Tom carefully studied Compton's game. He quickly learned that Compton was perfectly capable of taking care of himself and of the gradually accumulating stacks of chips before him. The driver played a good game, but, so far as Tom could determine, a clean game. When an opportunity offered, Tom endeavored to play into Compton's hand, hoping to lose to him something of the hundred dollars. He learned to the tune of something over twenty dollars that Compton was in no need of assistance from him. Tom chuckled as he bought a new stack.

They had been playing for a couple of hours when Tom excused himself and sauntered out of the building through the rear door. He hurriedly studied conditions in the rear of the building. A tumbledown, ramshackle old shed stood immediately back of the building. Behind the shed was a pile of débris through which Tom feverishly groped in the hope of finding something which might serve him for a weapon. His search was without success, excepting for a broken metal doorknob which, with some misgivings, he dropped into his pocket. As he straightened up from his fumbling in the darkness, something caught the broad brim of his Stetson and pulled it from his head. He reached up and found a rope, evidently a clothesline rope, that was attached to a corner of the shed.

Retrieving his hat, he ran his hand along the rope. As nearly as he could learn, it was tied at its farther end to a post nailed to the corner of a house. The building being dark, he was unable to determine its real nature. He cut the line from the post, coiled it up as he retraced his steps, and tore it loose from the staple at the corner of the shed. The rope seemed reasonably new and, to Tom's great joy, firm and strong. He made a free-running loop and attached the rope to his belt. It was not apparent that anyone had given thought to his absence when he resumed his seat at the poker table.

SHORTLY before closing time, the proprietor having suggested that the game be soon terminated, the driver cashed in, smilingly called attention to the fact that he had dropped a few dollars and sauntered toward the door, beckoning Tom to accompany him. Leaving his chips at his place, Tom walked to the door with the driver.

"Listen," the driver whispered. "Stick around till the ol' fossil cashes in, an' see that he leaves the dump. Then beat it down to the dock, an' we're on our way. See you later." The driver left the door open slightly as he cautioned, "Be sure the ol' bird has left." Then, slamming the door to, he departed.

Tom hurried back to the table, whispered to Compton to attend to cashing in his chips; then, with long strides, he was out of the door and on the street. Dimly discernible in silhouette against a light that showed at the foot of the dark street was the hurrying form of the driver. Tom hurried in pursuit.

"Say," he called.

The driver swung around.

"Damn it!" he snarled as Tom approached. "Damn you. I told you to stick with——"

What he had intended to say was chokingly thrust back into his throat as Tom landed a smashing blow full on his mouth. The driver sagged limply and went down and out under the impact of a short arm jolt that carried with it all the force and weight of Tom's hurtling body. The one-two, left and right, needed nothing to supplement them.

"I might maybe be makin' a mistake," Tom apologetically chuckled. "We'll find out later."

Using the man's own handkerchief for a gag, and with the clothesline rope to bind him, Tom trussed the driver and effectually provided against the man's making any but a gurgling sound. Into his own pocket, Tom dropped an automatic taken from the driver's pocket. Then he picked up the inert figure, easily shouldered it, and started out for the street that led to the trail through the woods.

Dropping the trussed-up figure behind a convenient log when he had reached the woods, Tom hurried along the trail. Due to the inky blackness as he reached the deeper woods, he was compelled to slacken his speed and although he had the rangeman's faculty for seeing in the dark, gained through years of night riding, he constantly stumbled and, on a couple of occasions, went sprawling into the growth along the trail. When he reached the big log near the point where the trail opened out upon Compton's clearing he moved more cautiously. He intently listened for sounds of moving trucks. All was quiet. He looked out over the Sound as he reached the clearing, expecting to see the lights of boats. Only the distant blinking of the light at the Point No Point lighthouse greeted him.

"I've bin a damn fool," he whispered. "They've landed their likker an' they're on their way. What was I expectin' to find?" He softly cursed himself for his impetuousness.

He had turned and started back along the trail when he recalled the remarks of the pool room proprietor. He abruptly stopped.

"What could he have meant—'puttin' the screws down on ol' Compton'?" he asked himself. Pondering on the problem that confronted him, he stood irresolutely for a time. "By Gawd," he finally exclaimed, "I've got it!"

Thoughtfully swinging about, he slowly made his way to Compton's clearing. As he neared the gravel of the walk leading to the back door, he hunched his shoulders and allowed his footsteps to shuffle along in the manner, as he recalled, of Compton's faltering steps. He intently peered into the darkness and toward the faintly lessened gloom over the water. Nowhere was there any visible evidence of danger. He could hear no sound save the gentle lapping of the water along the beach. Suddenly he stopped. A shadowy form moved dimly, quickly losing itself in the deeper shadows. He breathed relievedly as he heard the wheezy grunt of a restless horse that eased aged joints as it stirred uneasily in its sleep. Reaching the cottage, he felt a renewal of the conviction that he had erred in his conclusions. He felt ashamed of his manner of dealing with the driver.

Recalling that Compton had neglected to lock the door, and determined to carry through for a while longer his pantomime of mimicking Compton's homecoming, as he imagined it, he slouched forward and stoopingly reached for the doorknob. Something suggesting a sleeve brushed across his face. What seemed to be sharp claws or finger nails scratched at his ear. Drawing hurriedly back, he peered into the darkness, listening attentively. He sheepishly grinned as he realized that he had encountered a branch of the flowering currant which he had seen during the day.

As he again reached for the doorknob, he heard a faint clicking sound. There was something strangely familiar about the subdued sound. It had seemed to come from within the cottage. He attributed it to the release of the bolt from the keeper in the doorpost, but he could not be certain that he had turned the knob. He pushed lightly on the door. It yielded easily under his slight touch, swinging inward and disclosing the pitch black interior of the cottage.

HE TOOK a step forward. Close to his ear there sounded the sharp snap of metal on metal. His momentum carrying him forward, he lunged heavily as he identified the metallic snap. Quickly came the rapid *click-click-click!* of a hammer being pulled back, and, as he whirled around, there came again the emphatic snap of a striking hammer. He stared into the darkness at the side of the doorway, from which direction the sound had come. The open doorway, an oblong blotch, darkly gray, by contrast threw the corner of the cottage into absolute blackness. He could see nothing. He realized that he must be discernible from the dark corner because of his body being silhouetted against the window looking out toward the Sound. Crouching, he edged over toward the side wall. A muffled curse came from the corner, followed by the warning *click-click-click!* He waited motionless. A surging feeling of relief swept over him as he now remembered the peculiar staccato click of the cocking of Compton's old Colt's Frontier. He was gladdened by the knowledge that whoever was in the corner was using Compton's defective hogleg.

The futile snap came again. Instinctively ducking his head, Tom leaped toward a deeper blackness which merged with the opaqueness from which the sound had come. His hat was knocked from his head by what he believed to be the pointed weapon; his outstretched hand came in contact with something moving; he frantically grabbed at a sleeve as a stinging blow struck his left ear and jaw. As he staggered backward, he heard the *clank!* of the weapon striking the floor. Whoever his antagonist might be, he seemed to have chosen to do his fighting with bare fists.

Tom's brain felt as if it were whirling from the shock of the blow that had landed on his jaw. Even if he could not see this creature which seemed to possess the eyes of an owl, he would meet him at his own game. He plunged forward. Something—he could not determine what—struck his shoulder, causing him to momentarily lose his balance. Spinning as he lunged forward and striving desperately to regain his footing, he heard the swishing of something that narrowly missed his ear. A heavy, forward moving body checked his fall, but as he regained his footing he immediately lost it again as another stinging blow caught him on the side of the neck. The blow carried terrific force. He swayed drunkenly; his knees seemed to have lost all strength; he felt that he must surely fall.

By a mighty effort of will power he staggered forward, striving to locate this elusive antagonist who seemed to be everywhere and who was yet nowhere that Tom could reach in his half blind groping. Suddenly he encountered a veritable rain of blows that seemed to be still falling on his face and head as he crumpled to the floor. He was dimly conscious of a final smashing blow. Utter oblivion followed a dazzling play of light and color which flashed before his eyes.

The light glowed orange-red, flickered, and again sputtered orange-red. Tom drowsily watched the light. It had nothing of the scintillating brightness of another flashing light. Had it been a moment ago? Had it been a minute—an hour? Tom did not know nor did he, at the particular moment when he distinguished the orange-red light flickering somewhere above him, much care. The light was strangely fascinating, but he did not concern himself to rouse his aching muscles in order to investigate it. It was much more comfortable to lie prone on the floor, his aching eyes looking listlessly toward the ceiling, toward the blackness that was held prisoner by the ceiling. Gradually he realized that someone was striking matches. Out of a chaotic jumble of misty impulses he fixed one impression definitely. As his senses cleared, this one definite impression became more distinct: it was of a towering bulk which loomed over him and which occasionally held something close to a flaring match. He caught the faint outline of a heavy six-gun passing back and forth under a flickering light. The unsteady light sputtered—went out.

In the darkness there was movement. A heavy step sounded close to Tom's ear. He could feel and hear the movement; could sense it rather than see it. He tried to move. His body seemed paralyzed. He wanted to shout and found that he couldn't utter a sound. He felt something moving along his jaw. He vaguely, dazedly wondered what it was; then suddenly he realized that it was his own hand stroking his jaw. And as immediately, he found that he again had control of his muscles. All was clear to him now. He knew that he was lying flat on his back on the floor. Relaxing the rigidly tensed muscles of his neck, he painfully allowed his head to drop slightly over to the side.

From his changed position he could see the oblong blotch of lesser darkness that marked the open doorway. Outlined in the oblong patch was a bulky figure. The bulky figure moved slightly. The oblong patch seemed to become narrower. It thinned down to a mere line of darkly gray and smoky suggestion of light. Tom realized that the door had been partly closed. He decided to lie quietly on the floor and await developments. He could tell by the sloshy feel of the floor under his head that he was lying in a pool of blood. Not knowing how badly he had been injured by the blows which had fallen on his head and, particularly, by that final, smashing blow whose terrific force he had felt before succumbing to unconsciousness, he felt that his welfare and that of Compton lay in his being, for the present, as quiet as possible.

Across the narrow line of dusky light the bulky figure slithered. The shuffling, rustling sound occasioned by the movement stopped abruptly. Tom concluded that the figure had stationed itself at the side of the doorway. Hearing a crunching of the gravel beyond the doorway, he wondered if this mysterious figure had stepped outside. Then he realized that Compton must be approaching the cottage. Those faltering steps must be Compton's.

Cautiously swinging his body over until he could rest his weight on the elbow of his left arm, he slowly and painfully managed to rise to a kneeling posture. He swayed dizzily. He seemed to be in the vortex of a whirling blackness flecked with myriad pin points of dazzlingly white light. He cautiously leaned forward and braced himself by his elbows on the floor, allowing his head to droop forward until his forehead was resting in an oozy wetness that he knew to be blood.

A crowding, confusing medley of impressions flashed over him. He seemed to be digging through an accumulation of débris. He was searching for something. Now he remembered. Then, as quickly, all was again confusion. For what had he been searching? Then he remembered striking someone. He had taken a gun from someone.

From force of long established habit he reached back to where his holster should be hanging. He almost toppled over sidewise as he removed so much of his support as one arm afforded. As his hand brushed past his coat pocket he felt the bulge of the driver's automatic. He pulled out the weapon. Caressingly fondling it and feeling of it to determine the character of its safety device, he slowly brought it forward.

The crunching, shuffling footsteps seemed right at the doorway. Suddenly he heard Compton's voice.

"What the devil!" Compton had exclaimed. "The door's open!"

Fighting off the feeling of giddiness and faintness that accompanied the effort, Tom straightened his body. A slight movement, seemingly right beside him, prompted him to point the automatic. The muzzle of the automatic came in contact with something just as a pressure was exerted against his face. As he felt himself being roughly pushed backward and downward, he prayerfully gripped the handle of the automatic and squeezed the trigger. There was a muffled report. Something huge suddenly enveloped him and pushed him down.

"I MUST'VE fainted," mumbled Tom. Striving to bring his hand to his face, he found that his head was swathed with bandages. His effort to speak caused excruciating pain. As his hand passed over the bandages on his face, he dislodged a cloth compress. He blinked, winced, and hurriedly closed the eye that had been exposed to the dazzling brightness of the advanced morning sunlight.

"I'll say you did," replied a voice that was strange to Tom.

He heard hurried footsteps. He judged that a shade was being pulled down. Someone gently removed the compress from over his eyes. He looked up into a circle of faces. Compton was affectionately gazing down, his gray eyes meeting Tom's through a film.

"I shore thought you wasn't ever comin' out of it, son," said Compton. "Even if the doc did tell me not to be skeart."

"What the hell happened?" asked Tom, his painfully enunciated words coming thick and muffled.

"I wouldn't talk yet if I were you," said the strange voice. "One side of your face is in terrible shape."

"Jes' lay quiet, son," urged Compton. "We'll have lots o' time to talk things over. You an' me's goin' to be together long's God'll let me stay."

"Where's the hombre that knocked me cold?" insisted Tom. "I want to shake hands with 'im."

"No, you don't," said the strange voice. "He didn't knock you out. He kicked the side of your face in. The toe of his shoe was covered with blood."

"An'," chuckled Compton, "you'll have to go to hell if you do. That was Thagler, an' you put a .38 bullet clean through his heart."

"No!" gasped Tom, striving to rise.

"And you killed him with his own gun," said still another strange voice. "We've located the dealer who sold it to him."

Tom suddenly rose to a sitting posture. The room, its occupants, everything whirled in dizzying circles. He lay limply back.

"There's another—one," he gasped, "back in—the woods. He's tied up tighter'n an outlaw bronc."

"No, there ain't," said Compton. "Wilkinson found him."

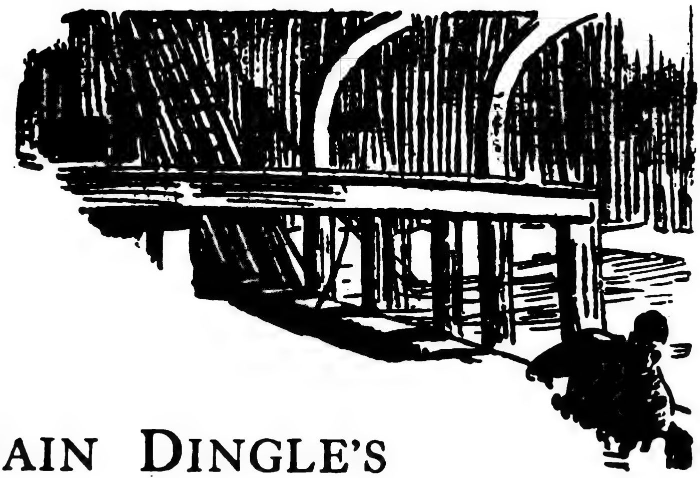
"Yes," said the man who had told of the gun. "I've got him where he won't give any more rides in speed boats for a long time. We gave him the works, an' he spit up his guts."

"Jes' let me ask one more question," pleaded Tom. "Was it schemed out so's it would look like I'd killed Compton with his ol' cannon?"

"Exactly," said the man Tom presumed to be Wilkinson. "They were determined on revenge, but were equally determined that Compton's murder should not be laid at their door. You were supposed to be here to avenge a Wyoming killing. And if their plans had not been thwarted by you, neither you nor Compton would have been alive to deny it. Surely they didn't advise you of their plans. You were due for a ride in a speed boat." The man paused. "Did they tell you anything?" he finally asked.

"Hell, no," proudly chuckled Tom. "I figger'd it out."

PART
THREE
of



CAPTAIN DINGLE'S

Great Novel of Mutiny and Gallant Manhood
on a Yankee Whaler

SEA WORTHY

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

The *Cuttykunk,* last of the deep sea whalers out of New England seaports, was fitting out for a last cruise for sperm. But old Peter Edwards, her owner, was sore at heart. For his son, Dick, refused to go to sea, disdained whaling, and no Edwards had ever before disgraced the fine family tradition of salt water sailors. Dick had good stuff in him, but he was wasting his youth at gambling and drinking.

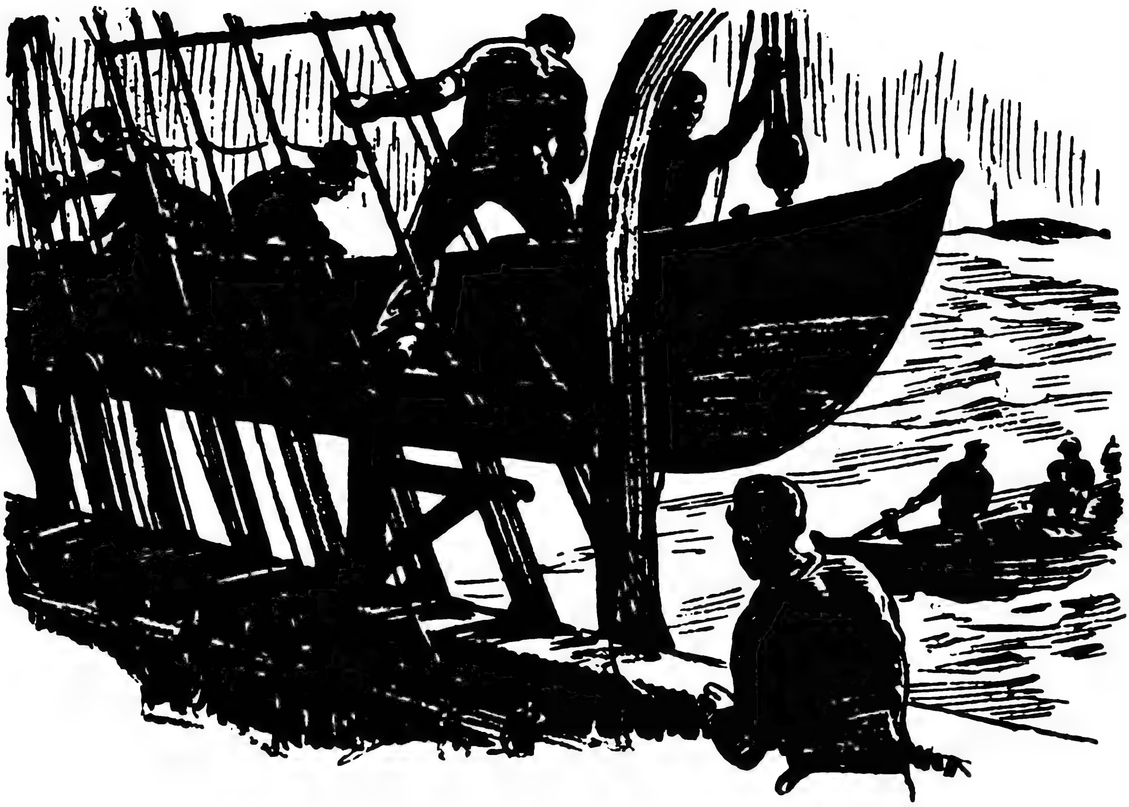
As a last resort Peter Edwards went to see Captain Turk, skipper of the whaleship, and offered him and the mate, Ben Barrett, a share apiece in the *Cuttykunk* if they would take Dick to sea with them and bring him back a man. And so, that night Ben took two seamen with him and waylaid Dick. Dick fought like a wildcat and would have escaped but for the treachery of Yerner, a town rough who was Dick's enemy. They bundled Dick, unconscious, aboard the ship, and to repay Yerner for his treacherous help threw him in the hold, too.

When Dick awoke, the *Cuttykunk* was far out at sea. Dick realized that he had been shanghaied and stumbled up onto deck and demanded that he be set ashore. Ben Barrett laughed at him. Dick lashed out and broke the mate's nose with a blow of his fist. Then Ben pummeled the lad until he was sick at heart and stomach.

So Ben Barrett set about making a man out of Dick Edwards. And gradually the lad got the hang of things aboard ship and began to like sails, and sea. Then one day a whale spouted near the ship and the boats were lowered. Dick jumped into Ben Barrett's boat. When they finally pulled up to the whale, Dick, in the cockiness of youth, seized a lance and drove it into the whale. And this thrust maddened the beast so that it scattered boat and crew over the sea with a sweep of its tail. When they were finally rescued by the *Cuttyhunk,* Ben humiliated Dick by spanking him.

Dick had been glad to find Yerner in a plight similar to his own. But Yerner, instead of taking to the sea like Dick, plotted rebellion and escape with the dissatisfied members of the crew. He often tried to enlist Dick's help, but Dick always turned a deaf ear. He had no love for Yerner and his kind. And now, with the Horn safely rounded, Dick set himself to study navigation while Yerner and his cronies made plans for escape. Ben Barrett mistook Dick for one of the plotters and locked him up. To Dick this was the last straw. Barrett was always hounding him. Well, he would join Yerner now! And so they plotted to seize the ship the first time three boats were lowered for whale.

One day after a terrific storm they found a canoe floating almost under the bow of the ship. And its occupant was a young girl! Taken aboard she told the captain the storm had blown her away from her island home. When the crew saw the lustrous pearl that hung about her neck the lust for easy riches was added to their growing spirit of revolt.



Turk took the girl aside and questioned her. She said her name was June Onslow; that she lived with her uncle, a trader, on the island of Fulai; that she had run away from home to look for a treasure of pearls. Her words, overheard by one of the crew, traveled swiftly through the ship. The men, even the mates, thought of but one thing: give up whaling and sail for June's treasure island. Only Turk kept his head. He believed this talk of treasure was nonsense, and, refusing all pleas to treasure hunt, kept steadily after whale.

June sought out Dick and confessed that her talk of treasure was all make-believe. What she had meant by treasure was the sea, sky and wind; the old whaleship had fired her imagination. For she had become restless at home and had run off for a spree. She promised to go tell Turk the real name of her island. And at that moment the lookout sighted whale.

The mates ran to their boats, but no men followed them. The crew stood bunched on the deck, insolent, armed with cutting blades. They refused to budge. In a fury Turk manned his boat with the solid old-timers of the crew. They put off after the whale; and Turk told Ben Barrett to bring the ***Cuttyhunk*** along after them. And then, with the captain's boat bobbing over the water, out of sight, Yerner and his gang overpowered the mates, trussed them up, and threw them in the hold. Mutiny at last had broken.

Yerner took command. And Dick, the only navigator in the crowd, was ordered to sail westward, away from Turk and his men in the little open boat. Unwillingly he obeyed, for Yerner had seized all the ship's weapons.

At sundown they sighted an island. Dick brought the ship safely through the narrow entrance but ran her gently on a reef. And the crew let go everything in their mad desire to reach the island. When the last one had disappeared overside, Dick ran below decks and freed the mates; then he assured June that she was safe. Busily Dick and the mates set to work getting the ship off the reef.

A shout soon came from the island and those aboard the ship saw the crew gathered around a cairn of white stones. A treasure mark if there ever was one! They reproached June with having lied to them about there being no treasure after all. And she, in a pique at being doubted, dove overboard and swam to the island. No sooner had she reached it than a fight broke out between rival factions of the rebellious crew. Dick left the mates and swam to the island, intent on bringing June back to the safety of the ship. Yerner greeted Dick and told him that he realized he had made a mistake and wanted to be taken back aboard ship. Dick said he would return with June and put the question up to the mates. But Yerner insisted on keeping June with him as a hostage. And with that Dick hit him. But it was only a glancing blow, and from where he lay on the sand Yerner drew his gun and fired at Dick.

CHAPTER XVIII

RED SAND

WHILE the fight was going on, and some of Yerner's men wanted to pile in and help him while others prevented them, Hogg and his gang came down closer until they were between the scene of action and the beached boats. Hogg had a pistol; the rest of his men seemed unarmed, except two who carried regular boat harpoons on long hickory poles. Deadly things that required either a murderer or a desperate, cornered man to use upon another man.

All that had prevented the island madness becoming a shambles was that reluctance to use such grim weapons in daylight and cold blood; and the lucky circumstance of the bomb guns being in one camp and all the bombs in the other. The same was true of the pistols. Yerner had all the small arms except Hogg's; and except for the one shot remaining in Yerner's gun, Hogg had all the cartridges. Nobody knew just how that matter stood, though Yerner knew he had fired his last shot at Dick that instant. Hogg was not to know it. And Yerner or his crowd could not know that Hogg's bulldog held just two shells. But that was how matters stood, and that was why no pitched gun battle had started.

Yerner's shot crashed out, and then a dead silence fell over all, which was not due to the result of the shot alone. June had uttered one sharp cry, then stood aghast. She could see beyond Dick. At the moment when Yerner went down from that last punch, Blazes had swung clear of interference and lifted his bomb gun like a mighty club to crown Dick. One of Hogg's harpooneers, a man who had seen much good in Dick Edwards and was long since well ashamed of himself for a fool, saw the blow about to fall and shouted a warning. Not leaving the warning to act alone, the man stepped forward, poised his harpoon as in pitch-poling for a whale over an intervening boat, and hove it in a high arc. The barb and shaft sank to the hitches between Blazes' shoulder blades, drove him to earth, and pinned him there. Blazes was dead before he hit the sand.

The clubbed gun fell, sending Dick forward at the instant Yerner fired, and Yerner's shot tore through the leaves of a palm by the spring. Dick fell upon Yerner and knocked all remaining wind and fight out of the man. The pistol fell and Dick secured it. In the hush that followed the ghastly harpoon stroke, men shifted furtively until they were readjusted in two parties not the same as before. Dick got to his feet, still dizzy; but he saw the changing faces of the men. All the men about whom there had been any doubt had joined Hogg, and the rest, crowding around Kopp, edged towards Yerner and faced the others like cornered rats.

"June! Swim to the ship!" Dick whispered, stepping to her side. "There's going to be a bad fight here. Can you do it? Tell Ben and Jed to come. There won't be a man left to get the ship off unless we can stop this. It isn't treasure any more, it's plain blood madness. Hurry! And don't *you* come back."

The girl darted away like a deer. Dick saw her reach deep water and then felt that she was safe, for she swam like a fish. Stoll had taken himself off to a safe distance, and, from there, was watching and waiting, ready to cast his lot with whichever gang should prove the stronger. His hurt rendered him noncombatant, unless he found some safe weapon ready to his hand and saw a chance to use it without risk to himself.

Yerner pulled himself to his feet with help, and swiftly realized the situation. For the first time, his was the lesser gang, though still the toughest in character. Men were cursing each other in quiet, deadly tones. The harpooneer who had struck Blazes down was trying to recover his harpoon. With a foot on the dead man's back, he tried to pull out the steel, and the barb held. When he tugged, grunting, blood spurted, splashing the nearest men. He cursed the dead man, feeling he had a right to curse even the dead when the dead was Blazes; and that frightened a fellow close at hand who could never have been tough or even mildly bad except in the imaginary security of the pack. The man whimpered and hit the harpooneer with his fist.

In a breath the mad mob were hitting wherever a head came within reach. The milling was too close for much damage to be done, but noses bled, and faces lost their shape, and Yerner, feeling the loss of his pistol, dodged around the outskirts of the riot, eluding Hogg, who was after him, and dealing out a kick or a punch wherever he saw a chance to his advantage. Dick, too, remained outside, looking on. He had discovered Yerner's gun was empty. He saw that this fight was going to last until men dropped from sheer weariness; for Hogg had held back the other harpooneer, and weapons were scarce for close combat. June was alongside the ship. They were lowering a pilot ladder to her. Along the beach the boats lay as they had been left; one in safety, high and dry, the other already moving on the little ripples as the tide crept up.

The sun was at the western sea rim; in the east the horizon already held the velvety black glow of a peaceful tropic night. The moon, but two days from full, hung there in the dusky setting like a silver shield—like the silver shield of a goddess advancing upon the flaming gold of the retreating sun, whose fierce glory, perforce, died with the day. The sea was blue as the eyes of innocence and tranquil as a silent blessing. Only the softest of sweet breezes stirred the palms; the murmur of the surf on the outer reefs had no more disturbing quality than low singing. That old whaleship, out there, held in her faded paint and metal the mellow color of a grand old painting. Yet from her decks had come these cursing, rioting madmen who made the lovely picture an obscene daub.

DICK swiftly made up his mind. He followed the battle until he overtook Hogg, who faced him uncertainly, his own gun ready, seeing that Dick carried one.

"It's empty," Dick grunted. "Want to talk to you, Hogg."

"Heave ahead," Hogg replied. "Mine's empty, too, though I ain't tellin' everybody."

"Listen. Can you pick out the men who hadn't quite gone crazy when Yerner forced us to desert the skipper?"

"I know 'em. How can anybody pick 'em out? Look at 'em. It's gettin' dark, too." Hogg disgustedly waved a hand at the fight. Men simply punched the nearest man. Yerner and Kopp both knelt on a man on the sand, gouging him, driving his face into the grit. It was the harpooneer who had killed Blazes.

"Ben and Jed'll be here any minute now," Dick said. "If you can separate 'em in the half light, and do as I tell you, I'll promise to make good terms for you. I won't do a damn thing to help any of the rats who left Turk to die."

"What d'ye want done? I'll get most of 'em. They're all set to give in since noon today."

"Send four or six along to the boats. Tell 'em to launch the one that's hauled up, and shove her afloat just at the edge of the tide, oars all ready to give way. Tell 'em to see the other boat don't drift away. Two men can stand by her. Look! There's the mate and Jed now. Heading right in for the scrap. Hurry your men along before Yerner's crowd get the idea the ship's deserted out there!"

Hogg was wise. He picked out men who had backed out of the fray with dripping noses or fat ears; men not used to fighting by wholesale. There are many such men in this world, who will fight and deal out punishment as long as their own noses are not blooded. It was no trouble to find six tired men whose vitality returned at a whisper that their foolishness might yet be forgiven if they acted smartly now. They melted in the growing darkness alongshore just before the keel of Ben Barrett's boat grated on the beach.

"Show your gun, Hogg, and back me up!" Dick ordered. The readiness with which men had been found to quit fighting on promise of intercession amazed him and gave him a grand idea. He would finish this thing up without Ben's help. He took out his own empty pistol.

"Come on!" he shouted, and pushed through the mob until he stuck his gun against Yerner's ribs.

"Don't move, Yerner, it's loaded now!" he said. "Call your men off."

Hogg attended to Kopp. And when those two men were taken care of there was no fight in the rest. Ben Barrett and Jed came up, Ben swinging his old gun, Jed flourishing one of Pluto's cleavers. It was night now; but the great moon lighted the beach.

"Here's the tally, Ben!" Dick cried boastfully. "You're a bit late. All tamed, they are, ain't——"

"Like hell they are!" snapped Yerner,

suddenly breaking away. He gambled that Dick lied about the gun, and was right. He shouted to his men by name and darted along towards the boats, two or three men daring to follow. No shots followed them, for Ben was no sharpshooter.

"Seems you're a mite too previous!" growled Ben, trying to distinguish faces as he faced the moonlight. Another row broke out down the beach.

"Come on down to the boats," said Dick, recovering his wits and assuming a fine air of nonchalance. "My men down there will take care of Yerner till we get there."

CHAPTER XIX

TURK COMES BACK

THE men who ran with Yerner dodged inland when they saw the men already at the boats; they stayed when the crowd embarked. But a few moments' thought, after they saw the boats put off for the ship, brought them back, shouting to be taken aboard, preferring what chances might be theirs to solitary lordship of a tiny islet whose only treasure had proved to be a spring of precious water.

And when they got aboard the ship and Ben Barrett put them to work carrying out the kedge anchor, they obeyed him, red noses, black eyes, thick ears and all. Ben would have listened to Jed and old Pluto and clapped most of them in irons; but Dick countered that advice with the better suggestion that they be made to work first. So, through the moonlit night they sweated in boat and at capstan, heaving in on the great cutting tackles applied to the kedge hawser, fleeting the tackles and heaving again, until the tide was at its height. They were subdued mutineers by that time. Ben had not been overkind to them. He promised them food when the job was done, no more.

"Now put yer backs to it and heave her off!" he growled, and the weary grind began again. Yerner and some of his intimate creatures hung on their work, too cunning to kill themselves; it only doubled the labor of the rest.

"Heave, you lumps!" snarled Ben, and passed around the straining backs with a knotted rope end. "If you don't shift her this tide she'll stay here for good. Now heave!"

That possibility seemed to arouse the shirkers. Yerner himself added his urgent note. What he actually said to the men nearest to him, which was in turn passed on, was not very loud, but the capstan suddenly began to turn with clattering pawls; the tackles creaked, and at the very peak of high water the old *Cuttyhunk* slid off the reef and floated stern first to the kedge.

"Get the kedge aboard, and let go the port anchor. Daylight's the time to run through thet reef again," Ben ordered.

Then when the ship lay easily at her anchor, and men began to steal towards shady corners to rest, Ben tried the pump well to see if the ship leaked after the stranding. There was a trickle.

"Pump, me sons! Rattle her clear o' water, then you may ketch a snooze, mebbe. If 'tis daylight, you'll take her to sea fust. Shake a leg, now."

When the dog-tired men at last turned in, it was within two hours of dawn; the ship was dry and secure, and the men so beaten they could not have defied the cook. A few of them had gall enough to mention grog; but none insisted. Three men had not worked themselves to dead weariness; Ben, Jed, and Dick looked too freshly formidable to quarrel with again so soon. Dick stayed aft, feeling he belonged there; and Ben, resenting the presumption, still kept quiet because of the need for peace—at least until the ship got safely to sea. He would put Dick in his place when the deep ocean rolled under the *Cuttyhunk*, and skipper Ben Barrett was in command.

Jed Roach turned in as soon as he was told he was not on watch. Ben lay on the bare deck beside the potato locker. Dick walked back and forth in bare feet, keeping lookout, or anchor watch, scarcely noticing what he was doing, but revolving over in his mind his own situation. He had been put in command of the ship by mutineers because he knew a little navigation. Ben would need him for that same reason. Ben would have to be a darned sight more appreciative. Who was it brought the gang to terms, anyhow?

As for Ben's thoughts—well, that weather-beaten old shellback fell asleep as readily as a dog, and about as soundly; and it only required the space of a half dozen deep breaths, just as he closed his eyes, for him to decide what his course would best be. He'd take the ship to Papeete, or Suva, or whichever regular port turned out to be handiest, land the mutineers and that fool of a girl, and ship a new mate who could navigate, then go to whaling again. Meanwhile, the gang would work the ship. He'd keep 'em busy. If they chose to believe he'd forget their sins because they worked, that was all right; but Ben Barrett's memory was not that brittle.

Down in the black forecastle Yerner and Kopp and two others whispered while the rest slept. They whispered of working just as the mate had decided. They muttered about the port they'd make, the same as he had. But the rest of their conference was not to be broadcast. It might have concerned whaling; but probably did not, since it sent them to sleep for the little remaining time in a chuckling mood, and neither of them cared much for whaling.

Hogg had been forced to sleep in the steerage, the boatsteerer's quarters, because the mate would not have him aft, and Yerner distrusted him. And depending on Dick's good offices, Hogg had worked himself weary and slept dreamlessly. Stoll wanted to be with Yerner, but had the idea he ought to rate higher in the council than Yerner agreed to. He'd take his rightful place in good time. For the present, they couldn't make him work very hard, with that perforated and inflamed shoulder. Stoll could easily be in a position to pick up valuable scraps of news, between forward and aft.

DICK trod the deck softly. The moon still ruled the sky, but was slipping westward. Soon the east would turn gray, and the stars would fade. There was a little tremor underrunning the ship as the tide swirled through the reef break. He had no means of knowing what Ben Barrett would do, but Dick was cool now, and the half hour just preceding the dawn is always conducive to hard reality in thought; certainly Ben was skipper, and until displaced must order the ship's course. Unless Dick chose to refuse, and thus become a mutineer in fact, or at least an insubordinate, he must give Ben the benefit of what knowledge he had picked up and help carry the ship to port.

But he did hope the mate would go back over the track they had sailed, and take June to her island home. Dick was anxious about June. Something had happened to him there on the island. He had looked upon June as a kid before; a good sport, a bully pal, but only a kid. Now he knew she was a girl. It had gone no further than that, perhaps; but that was something for Dick Edwards to realize, who had only known one sort of girl in those other days, the sort that only sex and unlimited capacity for gin distinguished from fellows. He and his kind rarely thought of those as girls. They were flappers, flooseys, skirts, fluffs, tanks—almost anything but girls.

For the first time, seriously, Dick Edwards thought of a girl as something clean, and sweet, and utterly fine; and he wanted to know where June Onslow could be found later on. Why, it might be worth while to start right in, when she was safely with her folks again, and so tackle this business of whaling that he'd get a command very quickly.

He knew his father had commanded a vessel at twenty-one. Of course, his father was an uncommon man. Everybody in the business knew that. Even Captain Turk respected old Peter Edwards. Rumor had it that Peter Edwards not only taught Ben Barrett the business of catching sperm whales, but was the only living man who ever licked Ben in a stand-up knock-down fight. Well, that might be. Dick was too late to teach Ben his business, but he wasn't too late to lick him in a scrap. That reminded him. They had been in the middle of a grand set-to when interrupted by that uproar on the beach. And Dick was dealing out as good as he received, if not better. Perhaps Ben Barrett was not so hot. Why let him take command? He had to come to Dick for navigation. That was an idea.

The dawn had crept up unnoticed while Dick paced under the skids. Now the glow of the sun itself began to redden the horizon. He had been ordered to call all hands at daybreak. He must do better than this, if he was ever to attain command. He went to the galley first, and shook old Pluto awake.

"Shake a leg, Doctor! If the mate don't get coffee in ten minutes, you'll be a sick nigger!"

"Yassuh, Mistah Dick," mumbled Pluto,

groping for kindling. Dick was on his way to call the hands, Pluto passing him on his way to the wood locker. Whaling had been so bad there had never been blubber scrap enough to start fires. As Dick stuck his leg over the hatch coaming, feeling for the top batten, Pluto turned with his arms full of shavings and splinters from the carpenter's bench. And suddenly Pluto dropped the wood; his vast mouth dropped open, and his eyes stared from his black face like spotted eggs.

"Ma Gawd!" he gasped, staring over Dick's head. "Oh, ma deah Lawd! Delibber us frum evul, amen!"

Dick turned. His own eyes popped. Clambering stiffly over the rail, tired and hard breathing, but glittering of eye, came Captain Turk in the flesh. And more stiffly, more tired, the cooper, and Chips, and the blacksmith, and the steward, and Folger, the boatsteerer.

"Give us some coffee quick—hot and strong!" Turk grated at Pluto. Then, peering at Dick as if unable yet to clearly identify him though the sun now lit up the sea he roared: "Fetch up them dumb-blasted mates o' mine! Sail away and leave a boat!" As Dick hurried away, Turk rasped out after him: "Wake 'em gently! Don't upset 'em, the hellions!"

Dick ran to shake up Ben Barrett.

"Come up, lively! The Old Man's just come aboard. He's all in and looking for your blood!"

Ben faced the skipper half defiantly. After all, what more could any man have done than he had?

"Where's the other pair o' bloody deserters?" snapped Turk.

Dick brought out Jed Roach and ducked below to rouse out the rest. Ben stopped him at the hatch, before answering the skipper.

"Hold on, Dick! Let the cap'n rouse 'em." Then Ben told the tale, shortly and graphically.

"Only floated the ship couple o' hours ago," he concluded. "Meant to cruise a while lookin' arter you, Cap'n Turk, before headin' into land the scum."

"We et raw whale and drunk warm keg water and rowed fifty mile," stated Turk grimly. He swallowed scalding coffee and flung the tin pannikin at Pluto. "Come with me, all of you," he said. "Git the irons, Chips. All you got!" And he led the way down the ladder to the crew's quarters.

"Hogg and six men did better than the rest," Dick put in. "I promised them I'd speak to Mister Barrett for them, sir."

"Shet up and do as you're told!" Turk retorted.

CHAPTER XX

A FLOCK OF BIRDS

THE *Cuttyhunk* sailed briskly eastward. The islet was a vanishing speck astern. In the blubber room, chained to stanchions with a small chain running through their handcuffs, Yerner and Kopp and seven men cursed Turk's name, ancestors, and luck. By turns the others cursed Yerner.

On deck Stoll sat on the tryworks, cursing Turk especially, but everything in general, though his shoulder was freshly bandaged and he seemed to have been kindly cared for. He peeled potatoes. Old Pluto came from the galley from time to time, inspected the job, and remarked with tremendous dignity befitting a nigger cook with a disrated third mate for boy:

"Peel dem spuds thin, Misto Stoll. Ah cain't have 'em wasted. Cap'n Turk tole me ah wuz to see yo' done 'em——"

At that point Stoll usually stopped the comment with a fierce look. It was early yet for Pluto to thoroughly assume the proper air of superiority that fitted the situation. Stoll was still the late third mate.

Turk was sleeping, as were his boat's crew. There was something not quite right about Turk. He looked ill. While he had been bandaging Stoll's shoulder, after rather brutally but wisely reopening the wound and douching it with creosote, a spasm or two had shaken him, and it was not mere weariness, or boat soreness. His rugged face was haggard and pale, and his lips had a blue tinge. But he had gruffly answered June, who brought him a noggin of rum and asked if he were hurt, that he was all right except for want of sleep; that he would be on deck again in an hour or so and make the old ship travel, to get rid of her.

"Then, maybe, my ship'll be a ship and not a madhouse, my lass," Turk told her.

That was not like Captain Turk. He

had rarely hurt anybody willingly, unless the hurt were tremendously justified. At any other time, he would hardly have made even Stoll work, with that shoulder, though it was an easy job he gave him. Ben Barrett shook his head over the skipper's case, when left in charge of the ship. For one thing, Turk had dismissed the subject of officers when Ben raised it, saying there would be time enough when he came on deck again. That meant young Dick Edwards ate his midday meal in the cabin. The Old Man must be ill.

It was afternoon before the boat's crew appeared. Theirs had been a tough experience. Others in the whaling business had suffered more, perhaps; but these were elderly men, all of them. They had gone through a terrific encounter with a hundred ton bull whale before they realized that the ship was leaving them. At first Turk refused to believe it. But she disappeared down to leeward, due west, and there was no longer any doubt. They had suffered under the blazing sun. The water in the keg was stale. The hardtack in the tank old and flinty. Turk had made them cut flesh from the small of the dead whale, before starting them at the oars. There was no sail in the boat. So rarely did the skipper lower away the starboard boat, and so poor had been the whaling this cruise, that Turk's boat was not as well equipped as it ought to be.

And they had rowed west, Turk steering, all that day and all night, due west, because Turk stubbornly refused to believe that all his crew were lice, and insisted his ship would come seeking them. He had suffered, had the Old Man. In a lifetime of whaling he had never before known a whaleman leave a boat. It was a shock that might well cause him a spasm. That was the gist of the cooper's yarn. The steward told the same in different terms to Ben and Jed at the table.

Turk came on deck after dinner, and first of all went to the chart table and checked off the position of the islet. Then he retraced the ship's course for all the time she had sailed west until he found the only group of tiny islands that could possibly include June's home. He brought her in, then.

"Maybe your memory's a mite better now, lass. Tell me the name o' your island."

June was very eager to do just that. She had no more ardent wish in life just then than to get back to the peace and tranquil security of her uncle's lonely trading post. Her rosy finger ran along Turk's penciled line to a little semicircular group of atolls.

"That's it," she said, softly.

"Ain't nawthin' like the name you said before," he said sharply.

"I told you the native name. I was silly. I'm very sorry."

She was so sincere that Turk's grim face broke into a faint smile. He had heard all about her little romance, and she had got very little out of it but uproar and stark ugliness.

"Well, June, it can't be helped now," he told her, putting his hand on her sleek head in one strangely tender gesture. "We can only take you back home, and start out fishin' all over ag'in. You jest keep stiddy as you go, and everything'll be fine. I'm sure glad you remembered thet island, though."

As TURK was taking an afternoon sight of the sun, he saw, through the sextant telescope, a wheeling flock of birds low down on the sea. They rose and swooped and whirled above what seemed to be a moving hill of white. Now and then the mountain suffered an upheaval, revealing a dark subsoil, as it were. He finished the observation, noted down the time and the angle, then took his big telescope and mounted to the mizzen top. In five minutes he was down, grim and unsmiling.

"Muster all hands," he said. "H'ist them pretty piruts out o' the hold, too. Keep 'em on the chain."

Altering the course slightly, he brought the ship nearer to the horde of birds, whose screams now filled the air. The men unfettered stood at the rail, watching. The chained prisoners were made to march along the deck until they could all stand in line.

"Take a good look, you precious rascals," Turk roared. "Thet's what you left me an' a boat's crew o' your shipmates to! Look hard, and don't ever you forgit it."

By now the *Cuttyhunk* had drawn near enough for the beating of wings to be heard above the creaking of her own gear. The gory red of the whale, with its stripped white blubber, and the black skin and the blue sea made a gruesome picture. With the sea boiling with the thrashing of sharks, and the heaving of the huge mass of carrion under their ferocious attacks, it was such a ghastly object lesson that few of the men missed Turk's meaning. Only Yerner and Stoll laughed. Yerner laughed because he was naturally callous and cruel. Stoll laughed because he was sore, and in that picture he could imagine he saw Turk in the place of the whale. Turk had humiliated him. Stoll would not have been so resentful had he been clapped in irons with Yerner. That was a man's punishment, anyhow.

"Thet'll do!" Turk snapped, the ship passing on. "Strike thet chain gang below again."

He set the ship back on her course, and at last satisfied Ben Barrett's curiosity as to his exact purpose. Ben was impatient about Dick's status.

"I'm goin' to sail straight back until I land this young lady," he announced. "There's plenty o' hands free to sail the ship. Shan't need no third mate, sence we ain't lowerin' for whale until the gal's business is settled. But when we begin fishin' again, there'll be work for a third mate, so you, Jed, carry on second mate, and you, Dick Edwards, act third mate so's you'll git used to bein' aft——"

"He's used to thet!" growled Ben, viciously. "He was skipper not so long back. 'Twas him as run the ship onto thet reef. Thought mighty well of himself, he did, and them rats made him their navigator."

"Oh, that's wicked!" cried June, leaping down from the skids to face Ben Barrett with flashing eyes and flushed face. "You know Dick couldn't help himself! He agreed to that man Yerner's wishes only to keep them from pestering me. He made that condition, and you know it . . . You do too, Jed. Why don't you speak? I thought you were Dick's friend."

"Don't worry, little lass," said Turk with a quiet, understanding smile. "Jed understands, and so does Mister Barrett. So do I. Don't you butt in again, Ben, onless you're invited. As I was a-sayin', there's men enough to sail the ship until we start whalin' again. Soon's we've landed June, and I've given her uncle a leetle advice about takin' care o' sech a restless pigeon, we'll hit out fer the Line grounds and foller the sperm ontil we're bung full. I'll let out the jailbirds then, and work the everlastin' guts out of 'em if the whales only show us a spout often enough."

"Ain't you goin' to jail 'em?" blurted Ben.

"Maybe it won't be necessary, Ben. 'Cordin' how you fellers works 'em in your boats. We'll see. Now, don't you set no masthead lookouts ontil we get thet island off our minds. We'll start in whalin' with a clean log slate."

IT WAS as if Lady Luck really existed and was having a rich feast of sport with Captain Turk. A sperm whale spouted alongside within an hour, so close that the clap of the spiracle was clearly audible. The ship sailed serenely on. Men had been told not to report a spout. That night, in the vivid light of the full moon, the sea appeared to be writhing with whales. Men grumbled. Here was a whaleship, over a year out, with one whale cut in, and the sea alive with sperm, sailing through a greasy fortune.

But Turk knew his mind. There was to be no more mixing of affairs. Once, during another night, when two great cows swam along parallel with the ship's course for half an hour, as if challenging her to chase them, Dick, who was on watch, went and wakened Turk. Youthful hunting instinct would not let him dumbly see those great creatures ignored.

"Carry out orders, if you want to stay aft!" growled Turk from his bed.

"They must be eighty barrels apiece! I could spit on them from the larboard boat," Dick persisted excitedly.

"Thet's you, my son. Go and spit on 'em," Turk grunted, and rolled over to sleep.

Only the freshening breezes kept the men busy enough to forget the scotfree whales. A sea slopped over the rail from time to time, and the mate must see to the lashings of movable gear about the decks. Turk had crossed royal yards and set the royals in his eagerness to reach June's island home. Rising wind caused them to be taken in. By afternoon the mercury had started to fall in a decided and alarming fashion. As yet there was no cloud in the blue sky. The sea rolled crisply and heavily, but it was long and unbroken except at intervals, and so far of no great menace. But Turk watched his glass, and he knew his Pacific. Soon, when the barometer had fallen three-tenths of an inch in an hour, he detected a fine, almost invisible haze over the sunlit blue of the sky. Still there was no cloud. But weather was coming, that was certain.

"Swing in the boats and make 'em fast, Ben," he ordered. He hung onto his canvas a while, for the old whaleship was stout and short rigged, like most whaleships cruising. With royals stowed she might run another ten miles before he need strip her to topsails. And the glass might be a liar anyhow; though he had rarely found the barometer to lie when a fall was accompanied with that insidious haze that was creeping in faster. He looked at the glass again, after half an hour, and hopped out on deck in a hurry. The mercury had fallen two-tenths in an appallingly brief period.

"Get it off her! Strip her down to tawps'ls and foretopmast stays'l!" he bawled.

Men followed around to the gear, muttering, glancing at the apparently clear sky, in no great haste. A man started the outer jib sheet before letting the halliards run, just as the first puff of wind came out of a smoky weather quarter, and in a moment the jib gave one crack and fled downwind in streamers. The flogging sheet hurled the sailor clear over the windlass bitts.

"Jump, you sojers!" roared Ben Barrett, easing away the fore tack. "Run up thet clew garnet! You, Edwards, up aloft an' show them swabs how to tie up a t'gallants'l. Damnation! Must I go up thar myself?"

Men needed no such urging now. The sky was suddenly dull, then gray, and soon slaty. The sea had a whip and a sting to it, breaking venomously. Dick worked like two men, and drove others by his example so that the old ship was soon under fairly easy canvas. But in half an hour more she was shipping heavy water, light though she was, and scaring to death the men chained in the square of the open hatch. The glass still fell. The sky was black. Black clouds rushed across black skies at eighty miles an hour. At ninety. At a hundred. And on the breath of one crashing blast the foretopmast staysail exploded in ribbons, the mizzen topsail sped downwind like a frightened bat, and the ship staggered on like a stunned creature.

"Get the main tawps'l reefed and set it again. Then take in the fore tawps'l," said Turk, anxiously. "Have to heave her to."

CHAPTER XXI

HURRICANE

IT TAKES an unusual blast of wind to hurl heavy seas aboard a light whaler. The *Cuttyhunk*, sitting high in the water with her empty casks, rode the seas like a duck generally. Once get her hove to, and Turk knew she would take care of herself in almost any sort of wind that might blow. But there was more than a gale in this elemental upheaval. As she swept to head the seas, carefully nursed by Turk himself at the helm, the wind hove her down. Her lee bulwarks vanished; her lee yardarms dipped; a sea rolled in from leeward and knocked down the brick tryworks. Bricks flew everywhere.

"Won't she ever come to?" muttered Turk, for the first time in his life uneasy regarding what the sea could do. The bricks rolled about his legs, floated aft. Water poured down the hatchway and a howl of terror pealed up from the chained men below. Ben Barrett drove his men from the last furled sail to help Chips and the cooper clap on the hatches and batten them. That was the first time since quitting the home harbor the hatches had been needed through weather. And the ship came to the wind, bowing the seas, just about the time the last wedge was thumped home at the hatch.

"Somethin' more'n a gale o' wind in this!" roared Turk, as the mates gathered about him at the wheel. "Look see how the glass stands, Ben."

Dick was down at the glass almost before Ben grasped the order. It was down to 29 inches. The last drop had been two-tenths. He turned to go on deck, and June ran out from her room, staggering to the giddy motion, catching at the table edges, laughing with happiness at the rough tumbling the sea was giving her.

"I tried to go up, and Captain Turk swore at me and sent me below," she cried. "I want to watch the sea. I always do in storms. This is a good one, isn't it?"

"It's a bad one. Better obey orders," said Dick.

He mounted the narrow stairway and reported the barometer reading. June slipped up behind him and darted like a wraith of storm cloud to the stern, and up on to the skids unnoticed.

"Twenty-nine and fallin'?" Turk repeated. He peered around at the smoking seas. The sky had taken on a frightful aspect. The sooty scud flew at terrific speed, low down across the face of a swollen, black sky. Here and there, at intervals, a patch of vivid blue showed for an instant and was blotted out as if by a furious hand. The seas rolled with steep breaking crests that had a vicious hiss to them. The most seasoned old whaleman aboard the *Cuttyhunk* was glad to use two hands in keeping his feet on the reeling decks.

Turk suddenly let go the wheel with one hand and clapped that hand to his back. His face was dead white.

"Watch her a while, Ben. I got a sort o' misery in my kidneys. She don't need more'n watchin' and I'll be right back."

Turk stumbled below. When Dick was sent down to get a bite of supper before relieving Ben at the helm, Turk's cabin door was swinging, and the crash of it was not bothering the skipper. The steward was at the galley. Dick called June, but waited for no answer then; he was wondering what could have happened to the skipper. He stepped to the banging door and hooked it back.

"Can I do anything, sir? Get anything?" he asked. He had to shout to make himself heard above the clatter of gear. Everything movable was moving. A bottle and glass had fallen to the floor and rolled back and forth on the carpet unbroken. Dick picked them up, putting them on a towel in the washbasin for safety. He glanced at the bottle. It was labeled like any other medicine bottle. The contents were half gone. It was some patent specific for Bright's disease. That meant little to Dick, to whom all medicines were alike—soothing syrups for old men. But he did want to be of service to Turk. That look of pain, of wan, haggard weariness, had frightened him. Turk was so completely a strong man in everything.

"Anything I can get, sir?" he repeated and touched the skipper's breast. For a moment he was afraid Turk was dead. But a heavy lurch of the ship rolled Turk over in the bed and he sat up with a start, his eyes blinking.

"Are you all right, sir?" Dick patiently persisted.

"Yes, my lad, yes. I'm coming right up," Turk replied, feeling around under him, and looking around the cabin. He saw the bottle and glass in the washbasin, and lurched to the floor, taking the medicine and shoving it away in a drawer. He seemed to look at Dick suspiciously, as if fearing he had seen that bottle label and unwilling that he should. But Dick only looked relieved to see him on his legs again.

"It's all right on deck, sir. I was just getting a bite and saw you lying there with the door swinging. You didn't answer when I spoke twice, so I was afraid you might be ill."

"Dick, you keep to yourself that you see me swillin' physic. I thought I hooked thet consarned door." Turk pulled himself along by the handrail on the bulkhead and went back on deck. But there was no question in Dick's mind that the captain was a sick man, and was ashamed of the weakness.

THE mercury continued to fall until it reached 28.60 inches. And Turk had never known it go lower than that. The men refused to go below. They and the mates, and all but the men in the hold and Pluto, huddled aft beneath the skids. Pluto locked himself in the galley as soon as the steward left him, and every now and then, until it grew pitch dark, his black visage appeared at the grated window, his thick wide lips busy in prayer, his eyes turned up until the whites alone were visible.

The wind was like a wall. To face it meant strangulation. Just as the last smoky twilight flickered and turned to blackness, a terrific thundering forward told of a jib burst loose from the gasket. The ship trembled under the wrenching of the spar.

"Foller me, who dares!" growled Ben Barrett. "If we don't make thet sail fast it'll yank the fo'mast out of her."

The dour old mate started out from the shelter of the skids and Dick was at his heels. The moment Ben got the wind fairly upon him, he was picked up and hurled to leeward like an empty sack. He disappeared in the smother of water in the lee waterways.

"My Lord, he'll be through the washport!" groaned Turk, dragging himself up from the skylight by gripping the arms of Jed Roach at the wheel. Men grumbled. They had seen how the wind picked Ben up. It would pick them up just like that. But Dick was already on his way. He let himself slide just before he left the shelter, and caught a buntline coil from the mizzen rigging. Then he let go everything else and went swinging down into the weltering scuppers.

"Oh, Dick!" screamed June, from the skids. "Dick! You'll be drowned!" The girl was crouched between the two housed boats. Dick heard her scream, but it was whipped downwind before any of the men underneath heard it. Dick could only go on with what he had started, though he felt every second as if his arms would be pulled out and his chest driven in. There was Ben, his legs caught in the swinging port fighting like a hero to pull his legs free before the wind and crashing seas beat him to death.

"Catch my legs!" howled Dick, and kicked out at Ben. One boot struck Ben in the mouth. But Ben caught the other, and Dick started to haul back. The boot came off. Ben fell back, and now rolled freely in the water, clear of the washport.

"Hold on now!" Dick flung out his legs again. This time Ben wrapped both arms around both of Dick's knees, and Dick began once more to haul their double weight up to windward.

"Oh, won't somebody help him?" shrieked June. A man put out a hand, but would not let go the other, so could not reach the buntline. Then small hands reached out from the skids, missed the rope, and June went hurtling from the skids into the churning foam. Hogg sheepishly started out from his shelter then, shamed by a girl. He had been disrated, was no more than any other foremast hand, but he had been aft once, and some of the tradition stuck. He let himself go, trusting to sea cunning hands to grab that rope before the wind caught him up. And he made it. He got to the buntline as Dick hauled himself and Ben into safety, and used it then to let himself down to the leeward water and grab June, half drowned and thoroughly scared. Dick and Ben, still hanging onto the rope, hauled the second pair to dry security. And by now the loose jib was twenty miles downwind, the shaking spars humming again as stout spars should in a hurricane.

"Get you some dry clothes," Turk told Ben and Dick. "Have a shot o' rum, too. Give thet man Hogg a snort." That was all the notice Turk took of the men. He did not look at June, but spoke to Ben: "Put the gal below and shut her in her berth. I'll have a talk to her about disobeying orders soon's this wind drops."

THE wind did not drop that night. The glass stopped falling at 28.60, but did not rise for a long time. And towards morning, without any noticeable increase in the wind, the sea suddenly took on a ferocity that was beyond anything in the experience of any man aboard. It rolled in from all points. The ship was pressed down until her decks were full and the clew of her reefed main topsail was in the water. She was flung upright, and down the other side, before Turk could even think of axes and cutting away masts. A terrific thunder filled the air; the ship shook as she had never shaken through any mere upheaval of water. Seas tumbled aboard and were rolled back over the rails. A ghostly light touched the yardarms, the mastheads, and the deck structures. The wind abruptly ceased. The thunderous sound persisted, louder. Then the wind came again, harder than ever, but holding to one direction steadily.

"There was more'n wind in that," shouted Turk, gathering himself together and studying the compass. "That was one o' them tidal waves, or submarine eruptions."

"We must ha' been atop of it, then," growled Ben Barrett.

"If we'd been on top of it we'd still be going up," retorted Dick, who had read of such things.

A ragged sort of dawn lightened the sooty skies and revealed the ocean waste of chaotic seas. Bits of scud, like dirty wool, flew downwind. The ship, for all her sturdiness and readiness for the blow, looked as if she had been swept by a vast broom. The iron pan that the tryworks had been built in on the deck, was wrapped around the pump like a shawl. One of the anchors, well stowed in its bed on the forecastle, had been torn up and flung aft to the foremast, into the rich, tough pine of which one fluke was sunk ten inches. Old whalemen looked at each other's faces in that cheerless dawn as if to see what the other thought about the night, before betraying what might be a solitary thrill.

"Glass gone up 'most an inch," mused Turk, gazing dubiously to windward. "Commonly thet means a harder blow comin'. Maybe 'twon't run reg'lar after sech a buster. Wait a mite longer, anyhow. Ben, let the men get some grub into 'em. Make thet old nigger stop prayin' long enough to git a fire started. Never knowed prayin' git things done yet."

The men had scarcely swallowed their hot coffee and cold salt beef before the wind struck down again, apparently harder than ever. It came straight out of the west, and Turk seized the chance, before it settled down in earnest, to set the reefed foresail. Then, with two men at the kicking wheel, he sailed his ship before the gale, right on the course he wanted to make.

"If it lasts, my lass, you'll be home tomorrer," he told June grimly.

CHAPTER XXII

JUNE'S ISLAND HOME

IT RAINED. In squalls through the day, and into the early night, torrents of warm rain slashed across the decks. It streamed from yards and stays and out of wind bursting foresail, like silvery sheets. It drummed on the decks and hatches so that the ship sailed in an incessant uproar. But the sky grew lighter. The sun had not been seen at setting, but one vivid ray of intense light had shot up from the horizon as it sank. An hour later a star winked wetly through a torn storm cloud.

Turk roared and shouted as night drew on. The men thought he was his old self again and clambered aloft into the still howling blackness to loose sails and overhaul gear. By midnight the rain had ceased, the skies were almost clear, and the ship buzzed along on her eastward course under topgallant sails.

It was Hogg who remembered the men chained in the hold. He took courage and reminded Turk about them.

"Friends o' yours?" growled Turk. There was something about Turk th vaguely suggested a man's desperate effo to hide a weakness. He jerked that sarcastic query at Hogg in a tone not at a justified by the matter, and Hogg, disgraced though he was, resented it.

"If they was friends o' mine I'd b down there with 'em," he replied. "You' be lucky if you don't find 'em all dead that's all."

That was a possibility that had escaped Turk. The hold of an old whaler is no be of roses at best, with hatches off and a sweet breeze over all; with hatches battened down, and the ship churning bilge like a cask in a cataract, the blubber room could be no less than a reeking hell. Jed Roach and the carpenter opened the hatch and took lanterns below. The oil lights burned low and blue as soon as they entered. The chained men lay like corpses. Chips hastily unlocked the chain from the stanchions, and the men were hoisted on deck and laid in the waterways where fresh water could splash them and the cool air from the draft of the courses fan them. They had not all recovered before another day was breaking.

That was a day of happenings. As bright and sparkling as the recent days had been black and ominous, sea and sky and breeze held kindly promise. By noon Turk had made up his reckoning and decided that June's island home must be within the range of a man's vision from the masthead. Three lookouts were set. And, though they saw nothing like land at first, they soon reported patches of floating island débris from the storm: palm fronds, pandanus fans, scraps of hibiscus.

Soon the grass roof of a hut floated past, with a wet and frantic hen on it. The wretched bird tried to flutter onto the ship's rail, fell short, and made lunch for a shark. A broken canoe came along. The sea lost its blueness and had a muddy tinge. Still no land from aloft. Two drowned natives in the fork of a twisted scrub cedar made a grim splotch of brown and green on the muddy sea. The crew began to quit the rails.

"Must ha' had quite a breeze hereabouts, too," Turk muttered, gazing astern after the misshapen tree with its grim crew. "Tell June to come up here, Dick. I got a queer feelin' about all this wreckage. Ought to be right atop o' that island now.

Maybe she'll recognize one o' these floaters. 'Pears to be considerable of 'em."

Swarming aloft, Turk scanned the ocean through his glass. On deck, June stared abroad at the desolate waste of turbid sea all dotted with island débris. Every minute more signs were visible that a community near by had suffered terribly. There were signs, too, of an ocean upheaval beyond all power of mere storms.

"Oh, look!" cried June suddenly. Dick looked where she pointed. The sea was alive with fish, writhing with sharks, at a point a hundred fathoms off the weather bow. The ship passed along the fringe of the disturbance; and it was Dick who shouted now. Almost touching the ship's side, like some hideous thing from the pit, a giant squid curled and stretched tentacles twenty feet long, as thick as the mainmast, with suckers along their under side as big as teacups. The girl clutched Dick's arm, shuddering. The saucer eyes of the evil thing seemed to be staring up at her.

"Git the dipsy lead over, Mister Barrett. Luff her up, steersman," cried Turk, and slid down swiftly. "Looks mighty like shoal water to me," he said.

The lead sank and found bottom at forty fathom. At the next cast it was fifty-five. Then, five minutes later, thirty.

"Run her off to the s'uthard," Turk ordered, and took his telescope onto the skids. The chained men were lining the rail, most of them scared, for most of them were poor sailors. Turk noticed them, and ordered them below to the blubber room again. The masthead lookouts hailed from time to time:

"Sperm whales spoutin' thick to wind'ard."

"Damn the sperm whales! D'ye see any land?" Turk returned.

"Seems like some floatin' to loo'ard," came from the foremast head, more hopefully.

"Blast your eyes! Ain't the hull ocean a mess o' some floatin'?" whipped back the answer.

For several minutes the skipper gazed at something ahead. Abruptly he shut the tubes and stood down beside the wheel.

"Stiddy! Ben, git for'ard. Go with him, Dick. Thar's a house or somethin', upside down, and somebuddy's in it," he said.

SOON the ship sailed through a mass of broken matting that was once part of a village. Here and there brown bodies were caught in the pandanus. One, face upward, held out a stiff dead arm that reached for the rudder as the dead man swirled in the wake. Then June uttered a little cry and went to Turk's side.

"Oh, that was Kadu, uncle's house boy!" she gasped, and suddenly seemed to guess what Turk had practically concluded already. She clung to him now, silent and awed.

"Luff half a p'int! Here 'tis almost aboard," shouted Ben from the bowsprit.

Turk stepped to the rail to peer ahead, the ship slowly turned towards the wind a little, and Ben and Dick disappeared from sight as they climbed down by the backropes to fasten a line to what they had come upon.

Soon it floated alongside, and the ship lay with her sails shaking. Turk saw there was a white man caught in what had been the roof beams of a bungalow, and curtly ordered the mainyards backed. He called to June, knowing what she would say. It was really not much of a hunch for a sailorman to have. She glanced over the side, and clasped her hands agitatedly.

"It's uncle," she whispered. "Is he dead?"

"Soon see, lassie," Turk muttered, and men jumped down to disentangle the trader and lift him aboard. Onslow still lived. He lived long enough to open his eyes and grin painfully at June.

"Glad you're safe, June," he murmured. "Worried me a lot. The blessed island sank in an earthquake. Don't know—what—you'll——do. . . ."

June's uncle died. She stood looking down at his thin, lined face. Impulsively she kissed him. Then she walked away. He had been all she possessed in the way of relatives. She was as much alone as he, though he was dead.

"Sew him up, Chips. We'll give him a decent launchin'," said Turk. Then he led June below while the sewing up was done, comforting her with rough words that only cloaked the choky note that would come into his throat. Perhaps his own ill health brought him closer to trouble in another.

"You jest make yourself free o' the ship, my lass, until we can settle you somewhar.

If we don't find nobody able to care for you, why, I guess the missus——"

She was in his arms, sobbing, and he could not finish. It was something new for Turk. He stumped up on deck again as fast as he could, after digging out from the bottom of his sea chest a mouldy and dog-eared book. He had buried many a whaleman without bothering that book.

And with the book under his arm he stamped around the deck, cursing idling seamen, sending them here and there about jobs that either did not exist or were unnecessary. He routed out the blacksmith.

"Git you busy, Smith," he snarled.

"I be'n gittin' irons to sink thet stiff," grumbled the smith.

"Very well. Now you aimin' to stand and rust until he's launched, hey? Git you to work on thet tryworks pan. D'you think we ain't goin' whalin' anymore jest because we heaves to for a burial? And you, cooper, what might you be busy about?"

"I was cal'latin' to rig a gratin' soon's Chips is ready."

"You git down to the storeroom and heave out brick enough to build new tryworks. I'll hail you when you're wanted to help launch Mister Onslow."

"The Old man's gone gallied," grumbled the cooper to the blacksmith. But they went about the jobs given them. And in half an hour Turk mustered all hands, even those from the hold, and lined them up at the gangway where Onslow lay in his canvas shroud beneath the folds of a flag on a grating. The grating lay with the foot in the open gangway, the head resting on a cask; the flag was tied at two corners at the head.

"Now commit this body to the deep . . ." intoned Turk awkwardly. "To be tarned into corruption. . . . " He gabbled much of the rest because he could not see to read it; but he came in strongly with "Through Our Lord, Jesus Christ, amen." Then: "Heave, Ben!" and the body slid into the tawny sea, shooting down with its weights to cheat the swarming sharks.

"Swing the mainyards!" he bawled. "Course s'uth-by-east. Masthead, there! Whar's them sperm whales you was yammerin' about a while back? Keep your eyes skinned, my lads. This aint a pleasure cruise no longer!"

CHAPTER XXIII

MISTER EDWARDS!

TURK was right. That was n pleasure cruise from the day th trader was buried. Before th bubbles that followed his launching ha burst, the masthead lookouts were hailin for sperm. Spouts all around showe featherly against the blue of the sea o the brighter blue of the sky.

"Strike off them irons and get the mutineers aft till I talk to 'em," said Tur before a boat was lowered. When Yern and his somewhat subdued gang shuffle in a crowd around the skipper, Turk gav them a short, terse speech that had n double meanings.

"So you'll pull boat, and haul blubber, and blow off your steam in the work yo signed to do until the ship's bung is fu of 'ile. After that I'll have somethin more to say to you."

There was no promise of forgiveness; nothing but a schedule of backbreakin work. Afterwards, uncertainty.

"Why would we work our guts out now and get shoved ashore into the rattle after we've filled your darned old ship?" demanded Yerner boldly. "How about it, lads?" Turk's eye was upon him, and Yerner turned to his mates for support. A sullen growl went up from them.

"I'll tell you," said Turk, grimly. "You'll do it because you've had your playtime and it's over. Do your work, and you'll get your rations same as the others and sleep in your bunks, when sleep you may. Try any more hoorah business and you'll eat hardtack and drink water and sleep in irons in the blubber room. Besides which, you'll pull boat and haul blubber and heave at the windlass jest the same. That'll do, my lads. Now Mister Barrett, and Mister Roach, and *Mister* Edwards, you can all lower away and see what's the meanin' of all them sperm spouts I see down to loo'ard."

Three boats away and eighteen men. Dick found himself abruptly placed in command of the forward boat, almost before he realized it. He was still buzzing inwardly with the sound of that "*Mister* Edwards." Kopp was at the stroke oar, too, his ugly, evil face all awork with hatred. But Dick scarcely saw who was in his boat in the first thrill of command. The big thing, the thing that sent him away from the ship standing up at his steering oar shouting to his men in a strange rusty voice that trembled, was that he got his boat in the water before the mate was afloat.

And Hogg was in the harpooneer's place. Hogg rowed the bow oar. Hogg would fasten to the whale if Dick brought the boat within striking distance. And Hogg, for all his dumb foolishness, was one of the smartest whalemen in the ship. Dick spared himself one swift backward glance, caught sight of Turk on his way aloft to keep lookout, and saw June perched on the skids, all alight with interest that was even stronger than her very recent bereavement. She waved a hand at him.

"Pull, you!" he growled at Kopp, kicking at the oar. "Hogg! Set us a stroke. D'you want those old mossbacks to beat you to your whale?" Ben Barrett's boat was foaming ahead, dragged by five of the soundest pairs of arms in all the crew, driven by the mate's savage tongue. Ben too had heard that "*Mister* Edwards." He meant to have something to say about that later.

The sea was alive with whales. As if the recent storm had emptied the heavens of all menace, the sky was clear and blue to the horizon. The sea lay level as a floor. There was just enough breeze to bring the old ship along after the boats so that there need be no heartbreaking pull to windward, towing a whale back to her. And right ahead of the boats rolled two great cachalots, feeding on the surface upon some plentiful food so much to their liking that they had no mind for the speeding boats. Other whales played farther on; and one boat of the three would have to go on for its catch.

"Hit it up, Hogg!" yelled Dick. "Stroke her along! Jed's cutting in on us!"

The boat swept through a tangle of shorn squid tentacles. One of the two whales slowly turned, cruising leisurely among the luscious morsels. Never had squid been seen so thick, or so near the surface. Barrett steered his boat in closer to Dick's, aiming at the turning whale.

"Ten strokes! Then we've got him," cried Dick. His boat swung sharply, his boat oars almost touched those of the mate's boat. The whale suddenly saw the boats. In a moment he would sheer off or sound.

"Stand up!"

Dick gave his first striking order in a voice that sounded strange to himself. He tried hard to keep cool. Hogg laid in his oar, and stood up, catching up his first iron with the one movement. There was no excitement about Hogg. The man was a machine, a death dealing mechanism for hurling a harpoon. The harpooneer in the mate's boat was up, too. His iron was ready. Dick swerved his boat, stopping his rowers. He was yet beyond perfect range, but Ben Barrett was about to fasten to the whale.

"Sock it in," yelled Dick. "Let him have it!"

Hogg's iron flew. Right to the hitches it sank in the black hulk. The mate's iron flew almost at the same instant. Hogg snatched up his second iron, hurled it, and fastened on. The whale was stung to madness. He twisted, plunged, and started off like a destroyer, brushing the bows of Barrett's boat and almost capsizing it. Then Dick's boat crashed the other, completing the upset, and the mate's harpooneer cut his line to save lives.

"Wet that line. Wet it!" screamed Dick, surging it around the loggerhead The seas curled at the bows. He was too full of the chase to change places with Hogg. The whale flung sprays behind him in clouds as he stormed along to the tremendous thrusts of his vast flukes. Dick held on to the turns of the line when he should have given slack, but he remembered that other time when he had got in a killing thrust of a lance to the disaster of the boat's crew; he was mad enough now to want to repeat that and show that it might be done without mishap. He meant to stay close to his game. The boat thrummed to the stress of her driving.

"Come aft, Hogg," he sang out, in what seemed to be a steady moment. He went forward now, clambering over the men and the twanging line between them. There were red streaks in the foam that flew past. Three irons had sunk into the whale; Hogg's first harpoon had been so cleverly placed that it had almost done the work of a lance. It was embedded deep very close to a vital spot. And the whale was slowing up.

"Haul in!" he ordered. "Haul!" He meant to lance that whale before it could dive. The whale suddenly stopped dead, so abruptly that the boat slid up to it.

"Watch out!" roared Hogg, who had caught a glimpse of the monster's little eye. "Out oars! Starn all!"

Hogg was just a whaleman now. He forgot that he was but one of Dick's crew and that Dick, shipped as a greenhorn, was now after his first whale as a killer. All he knew was that he had seen a pain maddened sperm whale's eye fixed upon the boat, and that one sweep of that twenty-foot tail would cover the sea with bits of boat and men.

"Hold on oars!" yelled Dick, who was not concerned with eyes, but had his own eye set upon a small patch of black shining whale skin just over the end of his gleaming lance. As he yelled, he plunged the lance home with a grunt. It sank to the socket and he felt the titanic shudder that ran along the pole from the creature's great heart. The next instant the sea arose in a blinding crash of thunderous sound, and Dick flew through the air like a flung towel.

WHEN he came to the surface, after a deep plunge, and shook the water from his eyes, Dick was floating in a huddle of oars and boat gear, with here and there a half strangled man, and all around him a tangle of whaleline. Hogg puffed painfully near him, coughing up sea water, red faced and astonished. There lay the boat, right side up and apparently unhurt. The other men clung to the gunwales. And there too lay the whale, dead as a herring, red trickling from its spiracle down its great blunt head, bristling like a sunfish with three harpoons and Dick's triumphant lance.

"Some fish!" laughed Dick, striking out for the boat.

"Some luck!" grumbled Hogg, reaching for the gunwale. "You must ha' stepped in somethin' before you shipped. Lucky we ain't all deader'n that whale."

"A dead whale and never a stove boat, my son," retorted Dick, cockily, and clambered aboard the whaleboat.

The boat was bailed out and all her gear recovered. She lay by the whale waiting for the ship, which was within a mile. And when Dick hauled his catch up to the fluke chains, making it fast to the *Cuttyhunk's* starboard side, there was Captain Turk, trying to hide a grin, looking through his telescope at the other boats.

The mate had righted his boat and was flying like a speedboat over the sea in tow of a lively smallish whale. He was already only a speck. Jed Roach's boat lay alongside a dead whale a mile to leeward. And still the ocean showed spouts as thick as steam jets in the Valley of a Thousand Smokes.

"A lot of squid about, sir," said Dick, assuming an air of mature wisdom that made Turk squint at him. "Shouldn't wonder if that eruption had something to do with it. Think it stirred 'em up from the bottom of the sea, sir?"

"Shouldn't wonder, Mister Edwards, shouldn't wonder at all," replied Turk coolly. But in his heart Turk knew that Dick had shrewdly hit upon the exact answer to that amazing harvest of sperm whales in a sea where, a month before, the *Cuttyhunk* had sailed weary day after weary day, seeking even a single spout that never showed up.

The ocean bed, the lurking place for the hideous giant octopus so toothsome to the cachalot, to which the whale must go, daring terrific pressures to seek out his foe and food, had undergone an upheaval in that cataclysm the ship had borne so bravely. Until the squid readjusted themselves and sought out new depths, that part of the ocean was a seething feeding ground that had already attracted whales in fleets.

Jed Roach was picked up, his whale made fast. Then, with a whale lashed to each side of her, the old *Cuttyhunk* went rolling down to leeward, where, the merest speck against the blue, Ben Barrett lay beside a third whale, a weft on a pole stuck in the whale's spiracle fluttering hopefully. Ben hoped he could be seen. It would be a grievous windward pull to the ship if he were not. But he was seen all right. Two hours after dark his whale was made fast and towed astern of the ship; his boat was hoisted, and the hands were fed and told to get a rest before starting in.

CHAPTER XXIV

GREASY LUCK

WHAT an inferno of work that was! For a day and a night and half another day the *Cuttyhunk* polluted the broad Pacific with the reek of blubber fed tryworks' fires. Greasy black smoke rolled down the level sea, too heavy to rise and vanish. Strings of soot hung from sails and rigging; the ship's side was slippery with oil and red with bloody drippings.

Two hundred barrels of oil they boiled out of the three whales, and every pint of it contained sweat of master Yerner and his precious rascals.

Dick, as became an officer, had a place on the cutting stage with Ben Barrett and Jed Roach. He handled his long cutting spade with the dash and assurance of youth, keeping a shrewd eye upon old Jed's spade for his own guidance, turning a deaf ear to Ben Barrett's surly mutterings about his cocky overconfidence. Stripping the blubber called for skill, but no more than a smart fellow, son of a long line of whalemen, had inherent in him. By closely watching Ben and Jed, leaving the starting of the cut to Ben, and following every move carefully, Dick did well enough on his own whale; and by the time the last whale was hauled under the cutting stage he knew all about it.

There were no easy jobs aboard a whaleship cutting in; but some were less deadly than others, and these were the jobs for the ship's good little boys. The wretched mutineers sweated in the sickening reek of the blubber room, coiling down the great, slippery, blanket pieces of blubber, working at fever pitch to escape being buried alive under the steamy, greasy, bloody mass. Other men at the windlass hove the blanket aloft until sliced off by a harpooneer's boarding knife, then lowered it below, while the other tackles were already dragging up another vast strip of blubber.

Then, when the decks were heaped high, and the blubber room chock-full, and the scupper plugs were in to save the drained oil that was already six inches deep over the planks, there was a short rest for food, and the fires were lighted. It was then that the *Cuttyhunk* seethed. Men below cut off chunks of blubber, hove them to the men at the slicing tables and they, in turn, cut the tough fat into bibles. These were wads of thin slices held together by a thin back strip, as the grocer slices bacon and leaves it attached to the skin. The man at the trypots forked it into the bubbling coppers, and the merry reek of the staggering black smoke was ameliorated by the milder aroma of clean oil.

One sperm head, the smallest, had been lifted aboard whole, to be emptied of its precious clear oil at leisure. Two greater heads hung against the ship's side, too heavy to be taken aboard. They must be emptied with bucket and pole through a hole cut in the head as they hung to the lashings. Slowly drifting away from the ship, she lying idly on the sea with sails clewed up while trying out, three ghastly carcasses made a feast for screaming flocks of birds and fighting hordes of sharks.

By night the sky was a sooty pall of red-shot black. Smoke and sizzling flames. The fires, fed now by "fritters," as the shriveled pieces of fat residue were called, blazed fiercely. The cooper's gang hooped and headed great casks. Harpooneers ladled the warm oil into cooling tanks and thence into the barrels. To free the groaning decks, men under Dick stuck full casks down the hold. Ben Barrett had a gang stowing them. Old Pluto fussed from galley to trypots, cooking doughnuts in the boiling oil, and whale steaks over his galley fire. The steward cut the choicest fillets from the "small" of the smallest whale, next to the tail. That was for the cabin. There was flesh for the forecastle, too; a great mass of red meat, like the beef of a buffalo. And while all was feverish toil, and men were ready to drop at their work, Turk sat on the skids, restlessly calculating the time required to finish the cutting in so that he might start all over again upon the teeming whales whose spouts played wherever the eye could see.

"How d'you like whaling now?" he asked June, watching her daintily attempt her steak a while later at supper.

"It's smelly!" she said, wrinkling her nose. "I was afraid the meat would taste like the smoke smells, but it doesn't. It's rather nice." She ate more confidently; then looked up at him with a shade of anxiety in her face.

"Is the ship going home now?"

"Bless your heart, she'll b'le down many a whale yet, I hope!" he told her. "Ain't gettin' homesick, are you?"

"No. I have no home now," she said soberly. "But you ought to get somewhere to see a doctor. You're not well, you know."

Turk laughed kindly, patting her hand.

It was something new for him to hear anxiety expressed concerning his welfare. She was brave about her own affairs, too.

"Don't you worry about me, lassie. You're a good little lass, but I'm too well to quit a whalin' ground as rich as this. I never see nothin' like it. D'you know, I wouldn't be surprised if you have brought a treasure to this old ship more'n you dreamed about. A full whaleship is a rich enough treasure, and we'll be bung-full in a month unless them whales gits so full o' squid they quit feedin'. That ain't likely."

THE whales did not quit. Day after day, week in, week out, the boats were away in chase. Never a day for a full month were the *Cuttyhunk's* try-works' fires out; and she took and tried out thirty sperm whales without once sheeting home her sails or moving from the spot where those first three whales were cut in. The mutineers were a sick and sorry lot. Too bone weary to think of mutiny now; but desperate enough to steal a boat and run if ever the ship raised land. She raised no land, not even a feathery, distant palm.

Day after day, Turk saw treasure poured into his hold. Day after day he concealed the pain that wracked him, lying to June with a whimsical smile, as stubborn in success as he had been in failure.

"I'll see a doctor when I get home, lassie," he told the girl. "Ain't no doctor like your own fam'ly doctor. Old Doc Swain set my missus's dawg's hind laig once. He'll know what ails me."

"Well, take your medicine, then," she insisted; and he would take it to please her. He needed it, too. He knew that. But it would never do to let her know that he did. That near fatality of the abandoned boat had done him no good. There were times when he gazed dubiously at the sky, which for a month hung dazzlingly blue above him except for his own ship's befouling. There was always a small breeze that would carry him to an island port. Always there came spouting cachalots to blow the island from his mind.

Dick developed a smartness that was a joy to Turk and a pride to Jed Roach. It was a sore thorn in the side of Ben Barrett. The lad was outgrowing him. Dick audaciously usurped the mate's place at one cutting in, and decapitated the whale himself. It was a piece of skilled whalemanship. Ben Barrett, at his best, took fifteen minutes over the gigantic anatomical feat. Dick severed the mighty neck and vertebra in just twenty. The head was fast alongside when Ben returned to do the job after going aboard to get a keener cutting spade.

"You're too smart, youngster!" snarled Ben. "You'll get took aback yet."

"Who'll take me aback, Ben?" Dick laughed good-humoredly.

"Watch yourself!" grumbled Ben sullenly. Dick only grinned and started cutting the head to bail out the "case." It was no time for quarreling. All hands were too full of work to breed idle blood; and it was always idle blood that made trouble at sea. But Dick could have wished that the mate had got rid of his grouch. Ben had never forgiven the skipper for putting Dick aft; nor had he forgotten that this advance in Dick's condition aboard the *Cuttyhunk* had not been quite as attributable to Ben Barrett's efficiency in manhandling as he had intended.

So, while nothing came of the little encounter right there, it brought back the feeling of friction that had not been so palpable lately. Captain Turk had noticed the incident.

" 'Bout time you laid off young Edwards," he told the mate at dinner. Ben was grim enough, sitting there, elbows on table, grease from forelock to boots, spattered with blood and grimed with smoke. He ate as a man eats who must eat to live, and has little enough time for it. He swallowed a gobbett of whale beef, washed it home with a sucking draught of powerful stewed tea, and grunted as he rose:

"If you puts a beggar on hossback——"

"Don't be a fool, Ben!" snapped Turk. "Dick Edwards is makin' into a top line whaleman and you know it. He's likely to go up over Roach's head purty soon. Better let up on him. He's too much for you."

"While you're about it, might as well put him over my head too, Cap'n Turk! I'll let up on him soon's I see him as good a man as his father c'mmissioned me to make him."

"He's that now," laughed Turk, sensing Ben's grievance. "Old Peter Edwards never said to bullydamn the lad after he started in to show willin'. As fer puttin' him over your head, that ain't so silly as you might think. If you keeps after him, he'll lick you some day, and then I'll be bound to put him above you. He's darn near as good a whaleman now."

Turk added that out of a spirit of raillery. It supplied the prod needed to make Ben Barrett determined to keep after Dick to the bitter end.

As for Dick, he found more minutes of valuable time in a day than he ever believed were contained in a year before. Between heading his boat after whales, handling his spade in cutting in, standing his watch, and looking after his boat gear, he kept hard after the elusive science of complete navigation. Seamanship he had acquired on the voyage with the aptitude of a born sailor. And when navigation palled for a few minutes, as before lying down to snatch a brief sleep, he had a little secret all his own which always stole a little of his scanty rest time. He had learned from the cooper how to make scrimshander, that wonderful whale ivory work beloved of Cape Horn sperm men. Out of a choice piece of bone from the jaw of his first whale he was carving a trinket box of amazing delicacy. He had discovered a knack for the work and he put his heartbeats into every little scratch and cut of the carving.

It was for June.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TRINKET BOX

JUNE ONSLOW had greatly changed from the elfin creature who clambered aboard the old whaleship out of a wilfully capsized canoe. She had taken up those duties which had been given to her before, and which she had mischievously cajoled others into doing for her. There was a sober earnestness in the way in which she now ruled over all the interior cabin arrangements. She took charge of the bunks; and perhaps for the first time in a lifetime of whaling, Jed Roach and Ben Barrett knew the comparative luxury of beds and blankets that were aired and shaken up every day.

Captain Turk was used to having his bed made; he carried a steward—some whalers did not—so he had a right to expect service. But the steward's duties did not extend to the mates. But even in the skipper's room the girl found much to occupy her taste for daintiness, so long dormant on her island. She insisted on dosing him with medicine. He submitted as much because he liked to see her very dignified air of insistence as because he knew he needed it. She tidied up his table and cleared the floor of boots and untidy things which the steward overlooked and which Turk seemed to be content should be overlooked.

Perhaps the girl had known so little family life that she scarcely missed her uncle. She never mentioned her loss, unless it was included in a general expression of sorrow for the islanders and their wiped out island home. Through all the rather grim and nasty business of incessant whaling she remained as detached from it as if she were in another ship altogether. The environment seemed not to touch her.

Looking to be about seventeen years old, she still possessed that mature poise and decision which at times made her age simply conjecture. She had looked almost boyish in her scanty island garment, yet her slim figure was molded on soft, rounded lines. She was feminine to the last supple curve. And she was actually innocent, naive almost; unaware of evil as the greater world knows it; astonished that men could so covet things that did not belong to them as to be willing to leave other men to die on the ocean and to become mutineers and potential murderers.

It had been a shock to her, also, to have men regard her as Yerner, and Blazes, and some of the others had regarded her. Their eyes made her feel naked. No men in all her life before had looked at her like that. Her islanders were men of naturally easy morals, as morals are considered by a self-named civilization; but none of those sunny brown men had ever made her feel naked, even though often she had gone unclothed to swim and they knew it. Life had opened quite considerably for June since that mad evening of rebellion against loneliness when she dared what aftermath the storm might yet bring and put off in her frail skiff to that wandering sail beyond the rain squalls.

Dick Edwards had seen the change in her. He put it down, naturally enough, to the shock of her uncle's death. She was not as merry a shipmate as before—but then she had seen unpleasant things happen. She would come around in time. She would brighten up, he knew, when he took that trinket box to her.

Dick was changing too, though being himself he would be the last to realize it. Past twenty, rising to full manhood as years go, straight as a pine in body and limb, straight as a line in character for all his follies of hot youth, he believed in himself utterly. He was perhaps not old enough to concede that he had been wrong and his elders right about those rebellious years at home. But he was fully aware of the progress he was making in the business of whaling and sailorizing.

He gave Jed Roach full credit—because Jed had given him that old sextant. He was scarcely ready to give Ben Barrett credit for anything; though really it was Ben's everlasting driving that first of all made him learn his work in sheer self-defense. If he remembered Ben in any way at all it was as the man who shanghaied him aboard the old blubber hunter. And no matter what happened in the meantime, he meant to settle that score once for all when the time was ripe. It was queer how he and Ben Barrett, so widely different in everything else, were one minded in that matter of a score to settle.

So Dick was apt to be intolerant of elders who were simply elders and not superiors. Just at the moment he was not ready to concede superiority to any of his elders, unless it might be the skipper; and, recalling how he had helped Turk out in the matter of taking a star observation, he was not altogether sure that Turk had anything on him. The feeling was grand.

But at present, in the constant uproar of battling sperm whales and converting them into golden fluid, that precious trinket box occupied his leisure thought to the exclusion of all else. He did a tremendous amount of work on the whalebone box in one short spell and finished it.

THE *Cuttyhunk* was under sail again. Her decks were clean and her try-works' fires out. She had only set her smoky sails that morning, to cruise lazily along after a sportively inclined school of whales that spouted and fluked a few miles to leeward. Turk had worked his men cruelly of late. He was humane enough to let even the mutineers rest when there was neither profit nor wisdom in driving them. The whales were too far away for the boats to approach without grievous labor at the oars and the breeze was too light for the boats to sail well. But it was enough to blow the old ship along with all her threadbare patched canvas set, and the whales would be there until she reached them. The sea was still alive with squid; the whales still fed hungrily.

So men and mates rested. Dick was on watch and did his last strokes of carving while sitting on the taffrail behind the wheel. Jed Roach had given him a tiny lock and key of cunning Chinese workmanship which chimed four melodious notes, like temple bells, when locked or unlocked. Jed had raped it from one of his own few treasures, sturdily abstaining from telling about it. When the box was finished, only to Jed was it shown. Dick aroused him from a sound sailor's sleep in the waist boat.

"What about it, Jed? Pretty nice, hey?" Dick unlocked and locked the toy, cocking an ear to the musical chimes.

"Dunno as I ever see much finer, son," said Jed, turning the box this and that way, squinting at it in critical style. "You was a mite sloppy over that thar last bit o' carvin', wasn't you?"

The blemish was so tiny that only Jed's eagle eye could have picked it out. But Dick saw it. He snatched the box, told Jed to go sleep his head off, and went back to his perch and spent another hour making the fault good. Then, after a look around, and a call aloft to the masthead to stay awake and miss no spout that might rise near at hand, he stepped below. The lookouts were unlikely to report any spouts if an officer left the deck. Every man in the ship, of good or ill record, was so completely weary that unless kept to pitch by the mates or the Old Man he would shut his eyes to all else but that unblinkable school of sperm on the distant horizon.

Dick knew it. He picked that moment to deliver his little offering because of that. No raucous hail of "She blo-o-ws!" would bring skipper and mates tumbling out to surprise him away from his duty.

June sat on a corner of a table in the cabin, sewing. She was gradually making herself an outfit of clothes more or less suitable for her barest needs. With Ben's very complete housewife, and an old silken bedspread of Turk's, she had already fashioned herself two frocks. She still went barelegged, though her smooth, sun gilded legs had the appearance of being clad in silk stockings. Jed Roach had made her canvas shoes, and Ben Barrett himself made the sennit for the soles. She needed no other cover for her head than her thick, sunny curls. She smiled as Dick appeared in the doorway, holding up the work she was doing. He was all primed to speak a pretty piece when he left the deck. Now he opened his mouth, made a funny noise, and dumbly held out the box. He managed to strangle out:

"It's—f'r—you."

Her eyes widened and a rosy color flooded her face. She jumped down from the table and ran to him, taking the box in both hands and pressing it to her breast. Then Dick recovered his self-assurance. She had kissed him once. Why be afraid of her now, just because she seemed to have suddenly grown up? He heard her delighted little exclamations—scarcely words—saw that she was as embarrassed as he had been a moment before.

"It's a little present, June. I made it myself," he said, forcing a laugh to appear doggishly natural. She was so close to him. Her hair was tickling his nose. He slipped an arm about her, in a most respectful, semibrotherly hug, pressing her warm, palpitant body against his side. A shudder rippled through her, and she drew away. She looked up at him shyly, all blushing, her eyes big and wide.

"Oh, thank you so much, Dick," she whispered. "This is too good of you. I know how little time you have had. I shall love it, always."

She ran into her little room. He returned to the deck, perky as a new made corporal of marines. She had never acted like that before, and he had put his arm around her, too. He had made her blush. Girls he knew in that other life had not known how to blush; as least, nothing he ever did made them. He felt above himself. He walked forward, humming the old chantey he had heard sung that first wretched day at sea. He had learned it since; and somehow he felt less sore when he thought of that day, because he felt that the song no longer fitted him.

"Oh, poor old Reuben Ranzo,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!
Oh, pity Reuben Ranzo,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!"

He was abreast of the larboard bow boat. Voices were suddenly hushed. He stepped onto the rail, peering over the gunwales of the boat. Yerner was there and Kopp and another of the gang. They looked murderously at Dick as he stared quizzically at them. He knew that look and laughed.

"Come on out o' that boat," he said. "We want birds of your feather where we can see 'em. Don't you get enough of boats, Yerner?"

"Aw, run along and tell Father Turk!" growled Yerner.

Dick had no intention of telling Turk anything; but he did keep a keener eye on those lads from then on. They had used his boat for their conference, whatever that might concern. For one thing, he immediately climbed in and overhauled all the gear. Everything depended on the soundness of a whaleboat's gear. And everything seemed to be all right here. But Yerner would bear watching.

It was scarcely necessary to set a special watch, however, for in an hour another terrific period of whale killing began that lasted a month, filled the ship bung-full and almost killed the crew with soul-numbing weariness. The last whale was cut in at fever haste. A gale was threatening, and twice it seemed that the whale must be cut adrift. But Turk had been having one of his worst spells of illness. June had been at him day after day. He must get to a doctor or he'd surely die. He kept the men at the cutting in until the last scrap of blubber was aboard. They cleaned ship and poured the last cask full while running before the growling storm.

"Throw over the tryworks, Ben. This cruise is over as far as whalin's concerned," said Turk, wearily. "I'm goin' to make land for wood and water, that's all. Then we'll git up and git fer home. I don't feel so good."

CHAPTER XXVI

WOOD AND WATER

THERE was much wordy argument as the *Cuttyhunk* slogged through the roaring seas. She was running before them and was snug enough, but now she was heavy with oil and not quite as giddily lightsome as when empty. The seas were warm, but they began to pour aboard. The men developed sea sores; one old man insisted he was getting scurvy. The hatches were on all the time now; the men's quarters were darker than ever, reeking with oily bilge. And now that the tryworks had been hove overboard and the masthead hoops taken down, the business of whaling ended, men had too much idle time for contentment. A merchant ship the size of the *Cuttyhunk* would have been well manned with half the number of men she carried. They talked, as idle men will. And in the general discomfort of the dark and close forecastle and steerage Turk had not felt it necessary to separate Yerner's gang from the rest, or to chain them up again.

"He's runnin' into Suva, I calc'late," a hopeful one said. Suva was a good port for whalemen before tourist ships spoiled it and made it just another sightseeing stop-over.

"Is that where them brown gals are so fond of sailors?" a younger one of Yerner's lot asked, licking his lips.

"You're darn right, my lad!" the answer came. "Fond of 'em cooked or raw. Cannibals in the Feejees, son, cannibals."

"To my mind, he'll make for Papeete," said another.

"Hell! What difference does it make?" Yerner put in sharply. "What's he goin' to do with us? That's the question. How about it, Stoll?"

"How do I know?" grinned Stoll. "Don't include me along with your bold mutineers. Why don't you go ask father?"

"Don't fool yourself. You're the same as the rest of us," Yerner snarled. "We'll take care that you are, anyhow. You'd better make use of your chances there in the galley and find out something. Here's one as don't intend to let Mister Turk clap him in the jug."

"Nor me!" was echoed in a dozen dark corners.

"You fellers row your own boat," put in Chips. "You don't belong in this company. I believe I'll remind the skipper as he forgot to put the irons onto you again."

"That wouldn't be nice, would it, Kopp?" Yerner retorted smoothly; but there was a threat in that tone, too. The gang drew together, apart from the others, and laid wild plans to be carried out in case Turk tried to jail them. It was fresh meat, fresh fruit, vegetables and the smell of earth that more closely occupied the honest part of the crew. Hogg was expected to know more than most, because he had been several voyages as an officer. But Hogg was not any brighter than others. In his opinion a whaleship went to regular cut and dried ports according to where she happened to be when water or wood were needed. If near the Bonins, she watered and wooded at Peel. If near the Fijis, she used Suva. Ships scarcely ever finished whaling twice in the same precise location; unless they followed a regularly laid down track in their cruising, voyage after voyage, and experienced much the same sort of luck in their whaling. Then a dozen ships might finish together on the Solander grounds off New Zealand, and wood and water and provision almost invariably at Port Pegasus.

"Well, he'll have to put in somewhar. Don't matter much. But unless he do, he'll have scurvy aboard right quick. I got it, I know that!" grumbled the old sailor who should long ago have found snug harbor ashore. The terrific bout of whaling just ended had almost done for him.

"You ain't got scurvy, your teeth are jest nat'rally partin' company with your jaws. You ought to ship in steamers. They feeds you soft grub and has stoo'ardesses to nuss old shellbacks as is weak and trembly," stated Mallet the cooper, very solemnly.

AFT, there was less concern about the port the ship headed for. Everybody there, except June, was due to share fairly generously in the profits of a full ship; to them, the thing most devoutly to be wished for was a fast passage home. Turk had almost decided to put in somewhere and let a doctor overhaul him; but now his ship was bung-full he felt better. He wanted to get home. He felt the universal urge, of man and beast alike, to crawl into the home burrow when sick. He felt better, but he knew it was only the temporary, fictitious improvement of revived hope. He wanted to be where his wife could tend him. He wanted old Doc Swain, if he must have a sawbones at all. Doc could set dog's legs. Nothing so serious as a broken leg about Turk. Besides, any port where a doctor might be found was off his track for the Horn and home.

The gale blew for three days, driving the old ship sturdily along in a smother of burst seas and volleying spray. On the fourth day a speck appeared on the horizon ahead. The wind moderated a bit; the seas did not tumble aboard. Hatches were lifted and water casks hoisted. Men peered at the speck of land, sniffing as if they could already smell the rich warm earth. Of all smells that intrigue the senses of a sailor long at sea, the fragrance of upturned earth comes first. That of crushed raw potatoes next. Yerner and his precious brotherhood lined the rail forward, leaving the work at the tackles to others. Ben Barrett reminded Turk that those men were supposed to be under punishment.

"Don't worry about them," Turk replied. "There'll be work enough for them soon. Then I'll give them their choice again, of workin' the ship home or goin' as passengers in irons."

"If they works ship home, ain't you goin' to turn 'em over to th' police?" exclaimed Ben. "After they knocked down and tied up your officers, set you adrift in a boat, piled your ship——"

"Avast bawlin'," Turk interrupted sharply. "I ain't so crazy as to make 'em too many promises this end o' the voyage, Ben. Let 'em wait. Let 'em wonder. But don't you worry, they'll pay for their fun."

Stoll staggered past, loaded with salt beef for the galley. His shoulder had healed and he had tried to escape from the humiliating servitude of the galley; but when that failed, and he still understudied Pluto, his shoulder mysteriously grew worse. Even that failed to move Turk. Master Stoll remained a swab, who had sailed third mate; and moreover he was not sure that he wasn't rated on a level with Yerner. He hurried forward with his brine-dripping beef. When he had a chance he passed on to Yerner what he had heard between skipper and mate. There was another wordy conference then, a sort of huddle in the bows, with the land ahead growing rapidly in size as the hours sped by.

Chips and the blacksmith went to work on the ship's supply of saws and axes, setting and sharpening them for the wood cutting. The cooper walked around his water casks with mallet and iron. Dick and Jed, with a couple of hands, rigged burtons for the hoisting out and in of the casks. Ben Barrett, growling like a bear, oversaw all the various jobs. He had never heard of such a mad idea as Turk's. Leaving a bunch of mutinous dogs loose, with a water and wood party just ahead. And axes, and saws, and boats ready to hand. He growled, but he felt for the first time in his life afloat glad that he had kept that ancient pistol. Since he had occasion to use it before, unwillingly, he now had it cleaned and oiled, and carried it inside his belt willingly.

But Turk knew what he was about. The island ahead grew in contours, until soon it could be clearly made out. Then dubious mutterings were heard. The respectable men of the crew grumbled because it was not the place any of them had guessed. Yerner's lot drew into a huddle again, whispering excitedly. Two of them turned aft and cursed Turk. He had brought the ship, for wood and water, back to the scene of their mad treasure quest.

"Keep quiet!" Yerner snapped at them. "It's better than jail, ain't it?"

"How in hell kin a bunch o' men hide out in that two by four lot?" snarled Kopp.

"Plenty o' bush, ain't there? Let 'em try to get us back on this old blubber hunter. Let 'em try to get *me!* The rest can suit yourselves."

TURK waited until he had brought the island on the bearing for running through the reef entrance, then told the mate to get the anchor over, ready to let go. He had sail taken in until the ship blew easily along under no more than could safely be left on her while anchored in the lagoon, then told off the men for the various jobs so that there would be no delay when at anchor.

"Jed, pick you out six good men for fillin' the casks. You need buckets and funnels at the spring. Dick, you take two likely lads for cuttin' wood. It don't 'pear to be heavy timber. Mister Barrett will have the rest o' the men to help load the wood. 'Tis a fine day, and if you're right smart you ought all hands to have an hour or two of daylight left for stretchin' your legs before we put out for home. Pluto, you and the stoo'ard go see how about some o' that fresh hawg meat ashore there. Might be some sort o' fruit or yams. Surely thar's palm cabbage. Take your boy along, Pluto, and make him climb trees. Them hoodlums can stay aboard."

Stoll swallowed the insult, as he had swallowed many. He was the kind who would. Anyhow, he was going on a fairly easy job. He waited, grinning at Yerner, wondering what was in store for the mutineers. They were wondering, too; all except Yerner. Yerner knew now that Turk was crazy. He meant to make the gang stay aboard; meant to deprive them of a shore jaunt. The gang tried to get Yerner's eye. This was going to upset all their little schemes. Kopp slithered up to Yerner, thumping him in the ribs.

"How about it?" he croaked. "You lettin' him git away with that?"

"Shut up!" Yerner muttered. "We'll all be left aboard here, and nobody else except Turk and the chippy! For Pete's sake try to look sore!" That hint was necessary. Kopp had suddenly seen the light. His evil face was a mask of unholy glee. He weaved among his fellows, telling them the glad news, bidding them try to look sore. If Captain Turk bothered to look their way, he undoubtedly saw a downcast lot of rascals. They were so downcast that they aroused pity in the breast of the old whaleman who thought he had scurvy.

"Thet's a shame! I'll go speak to the Old Man," mumbled the ancient, full of the hope of fruit, and bubbling water from the spring. "A man has rights. I'll tell him so." He would have shambled aft on his errand of mercy. Yerner seized him by the shirt, and hauled him back.

"Keep yer nose out o' this, unless you want to smell hell! Watch him, Kopp!"

The ship lost headway in the falling breeze. She swam slowly abreast of the entrance and squared away to run in. There was nothing more to do for half an hour, until she came to anchor; and the men lounged in little knots. Everybody seemed at peace, unless perhaps it was the old sailor who still grumbled at Yerner's rebuff, going from one to another for sympathy. Everybody seemed to have been given the task that pleased him best. Yet not all. The mate paced to and fro, muttering. He, too, believed Turk must be crazy. But Turk was not.

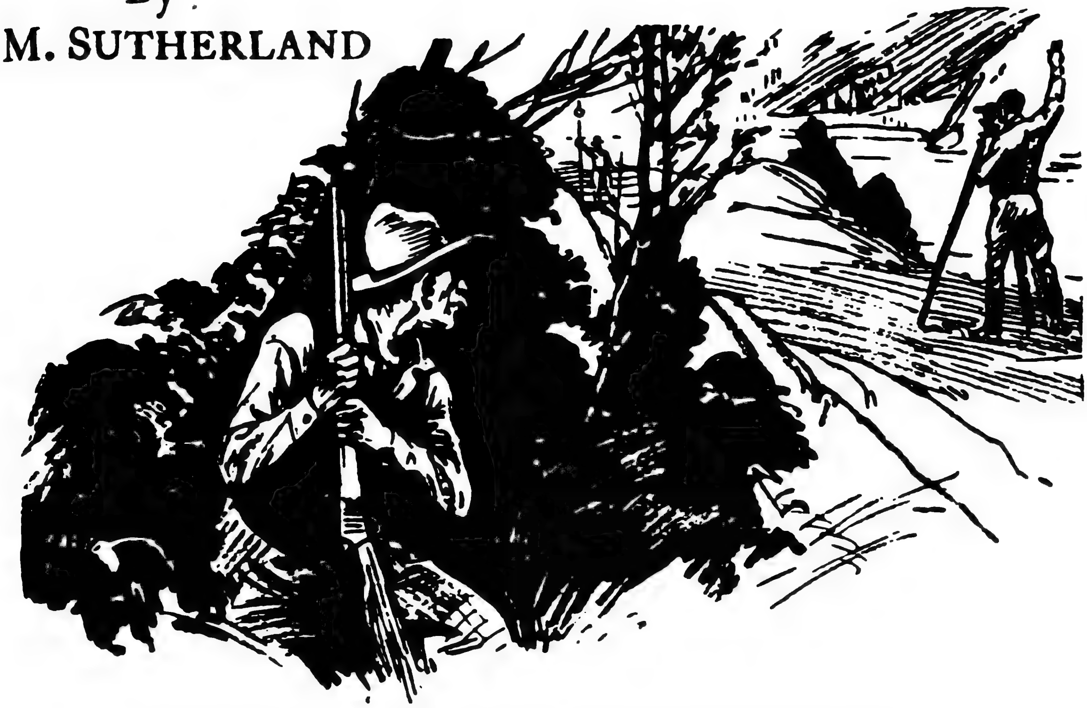
"Ben," the skipper said, as soon as the ship was headed in for the anchorage, "Ben, might as well fasten them birds up now. They've had a right smart spell of liberty. Get Chips and the smith, and run a chain through the irons when you get 'em on. Let 'em stay on deck. They'll be in the way of striking the casks below if you put 'em in the blubber room."

The order was given in a quiet tone; but Yerner's sharp ears had sensed its import. He started to yell, to warn the rest, but there was Turk, quiet and sure, with his own recovered revolver, and it seemed to cover everyone of them.

Ten minutes later the ship swung to her anchor.

In the concluding chapters next month the rich laden Cuttyhunk *makes ready for the long passage home—and the mutineers, biding their time, await the desperate days south of the Horn for their last bloody rebellion.*

By
H. M. SUTHERLAND



A Tale of Merciless Mountain Feud

WITHOUT QUARTER

HUGH O'HEARN peered through his transit and gestured methodically to his rodsman. To all appearances his thoughts were entirely upon the line he was running, and not even his helpers were aware that anything unusual had happened. Despite his studied nonchalance his fingers trembled slightly as he adjusted the focus, and a crinkly sensation ran the length of his spinal column. Somewhere in the bushes, not thirty steps behind him, lay a hillman peering over the sights of a rifle, and those sights were aligned on a point midway between the engineer's shoulder blades. This, O'Hearn knew. And this knowledge brought a chill to his heart, a paralyzing numbness to his mind; for he had seen one of those deadly Winchesters bark a squirrel's head at fifty yards more than once since coming to the Cumberlands.

For a week he had realized that he and his party were under close surveillance, and almost daily he had caught sight of a lurking shadow slipping through the dense beds of rhododendron, but thus far no open violence had been offered. At first, he thought this to be merely the precautions of the moonshiners whose stills he knew to be in operation back in the more isolated and secluded hollows; but as the watchfulness continued, he began to realize that there was something deeper, more sinister behind it all.

From more than one source, since starting the preliminary line for the railroad down McLain River, he had learned that surveying was an old trick of the revenue officers, who had, on several occasions, succeeded in running their line straight into the moonshining outfit of some hillman. But surely, those moonshiners would have enough sense to realize that if he were after stills, he would not do all his surveying along the banks of the river. With this realization he had been forced to the conclusion that some other business was afoot of which he had not the slightest inkling.

He didn't dare glance over his shoulder in the direction he knew the hidden watcher to be for fear that such an action might betray his suspicions to the hillman; O'Hearn knew that his safest course was to stick rigidly to the business before him. At last he picked up his instrument and strode forward, quickening his pace unconsciously as he neared a grove of alder bushes.

"That damned hill-billy is trailing us again," he declared in a low tone to Mack Granger, his rodsman when he had caught up. "Had me covered back there in that ravine, but he evidently had a change of heart."

Granger shot a half apprehensive glance over his shoulder.

"They've got me so I walk sidewise like a hound dog," replied Granger with a nervous laugh. "What the devil is all the mystery about anyhow? It's enough to give a man the jimjams."

"I've got a hunch Good Lige can tell us more than he has," said O'Hearn after a moment's pause. "I'm going to put a few direct questions to him at supper tonight and see if he can't throw a little light on it."

Throughout the afternoon they worked along a pine covered bluff overhanging the river, and several times during that period O'Hearn found himself staring intently in the direction of the dense beds of rhododendron on the opposite side of the river; for he instinctively sensed the presence of the lone watcher there. At sunset he, Granger and his two brush choppers made their way swiftly back to the camp a mile up the stream.

Their two tents and the cook shack had been erected in a grove of sycamore trees on the banks of the river just below the log cabin of Good Lige Cantrell, a patriarchial old mountaineer, loquacious and affable, who spent much of his time sitting before the tents with the engineers, sometimes even accompanying them on their day's work. His keen sense of humor and his quaint philosophy made his visits more than welcome to O'Hearn.

The name "Good Lige" had piqued O'Hearn's curiosity, and the old man had explained it with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Thar was two of us Lige Cantrells—me an' Cousin Dave's boy. He was a purty tough citizen, Dave's Lige was, whilst I ust to shout at the hardshell meetin's. They got to callin' me 'Good Lige' an' him 'Bad Lige'." He stroked his beard thoughtfully, and stared off toward the river. "Yes, Bad Lige was a purty tough citizen. They hung him over Kaintucky onct, but he broke the rope, picked up the preacher who was thar to give him spiritual comfort, slung him acrost his shoulders so's the sheriff couldn't shoot him, an' outrun the whole caboodle of 'em. Got clean away an' he's livin' out West, now, som'eres."

SOON after supper that night, Good Lige came out and resumed his accustomed seat against the bole of a sycamore near the fire, sucking contentedly at his pipe. O'Hearn brought out a couple of camp chairs, but Granger had stretched himself out comfortably before the fire, and Good Lige waved aside the proffered seat.

"Did ye get into the Devil's Apron country today?" queried the old hillman, glancing up at O'Hearn.

"The what?" O'Hearn leaned forward with interest.

"The Devil's Apron country," explained Good Lige, laughing silently. "It begins down thar whar that pine bluff heads into the river an' gets worse the further ye go."

"We reached the pine bluff today," admitted O'Hearn, "but this Devil's Apron business is a new one on me. Why—how did it ever get a name like that?"

"It's jest a sort of a sayin', a fairy tale, I reckon ye'd call it," declared the old man, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "Accordin' to old Preacher Lance Morton, a hardshell who ust to live hereabouts—an' I've heard him tell it many's the time—the Lord onct put the devil to work movin' hell, carryin' out the big rocks an' things an' scatterin' 'em over the world. The devil was totin' 'em in a big, green-hide apron. As he was comin' down McLain River his apron string broke an' he spilled the whole caboodle. That, says Preacher Lance, is what makes it so tarnal rough down thar. An' thar's some folks that believed him." Again he opened his mouth in his peculiar, silent laughter.

"I wonder if that preacher could explain something else about that country?" queried O'Hearn. "Do you think he could tell me why someone is always watching us when we are at work down there?"

"Eh!" The old man straightened up from his half reclining position. "Did ye say somebody was watchin' ye?"

"Yes," nodded O'Hearn. "And not only that, but I've a hunch they keep us covered every time we cross to the left side of the river. I caught the glint of a rifle barrel in the sunlight yesterday and——"

"O' course they all carry rifles," declared Good Lige with a grin, "in hopes of gettin' a pot shot at a turkey or a revenue officer or somethin'."

"But there's some mystery about all this," persisted O'Hearn. "I thought at first it was just moonshiners guarding their stills, but I'm convinced there's something else behind it all, and I thought that perhaps you could give me an idea what it is all about."

For a full minute Good Lige gazed reflectively into the fire, and at last seemed to come to a decision.

"I don't make a habit of talkin' about my neighbors' business," he declared in guarded tones, "an' besides, in this case I figger 'tain't plum healthy. But thar is some sort of a mystery about that Devil's Apron country that I ain't never rightly understood, an' I'm admittin' that it's got my curiosity treed, but I ain't so anxious to know what 'tis that I'm goin' to make any personal investigation. Now thar ain't nobody livin' in that Devil's Apron country except the Fralins, an' whar they live, nobody else is goin' to try it. Up the river an' back along the Pinnacle Ridge country live the Halls—King Hiram an' Gideon an' all their kin. Ye've seen King Hiram's son, Bart, ride by here on that fast roan hoss I reckon?"

O'Hearn nodded.

"Wa'l, I reckon ye can thank the Fralins and the Halls for whatever mystery ye've located in the Devil's Apron country," continued Good Lige. "Thar's somethin' thar that the Fralins want mighty bad—else they wouldn't be puttin' up sech a fight for a piece of wild land which ain't worth nothin' much."

"Lawsuit?" questioned O'Hearn with interest.

"Yeah. Over two-three hundred acres of the roughest country ye ever seen, jest back of Big Alex Fralin's place a half a mile below that pine bluff whar ye was today. The case come up in court this spring an' the Fralins won it, the Halls claimin' that the court was bought out. I heard part of the trial, an' it 'pears like the Fralins are bringin' suit on squatter rights, but it don't look like they've got much of a case. Old King Hiram Hall appealed the case, an' from that I figger he's got the idee that thar's somethin' on that land worth while."

"And so the Fralins are guarding it now?" asked O'Hearn, beginning to understand.

"So dadburned close 'twouldn't be safe for a jay bird to 'light in it." The old hillman chuckled softly. "Thar's been trouble over it for the last year or two, an' things seem to be comin' to a head now. I've been kinda hopin' that thar might be some way out of it, but I reckon things have gone too far now. The Halls an' Fralins are both sort of mule headed an' neither side won't give in."

"Have you an idea what it might be, Uncle Lige," broke in Granger.

"Nary an idee," he negatived softly, peering into the gathering darkness. "All I know is that the Fralins had a Gove'nment man or somebody in thar about three months ago lookin' at somethin', but nobody knows what 'twas."

GOOD LIGE lapsed into silence, and somewhere on the opposite mountainside a giant owl lifted his mournful voice to his mate far back in the hills. Unconsciously, O'Hearn shivered at the very loneliness of the Cumberlands, oppressively silent during the day, and reverberating with the weird calls of the night birds when dusk had fallen.

"I'd like to talk with King Hiram Hall sometime," declared O'Hearn. "Maybe he could throw a bit of light on this."

"King Hiram is a close mouthed cuss," replied Good Lige. "I doubt ye could get him to do much talkin', but ye can try. He's a hoss trader an' gone most of the time, but he's most allus thar on Sundays. I'll go up thar with ye any time ye want to. It ain't but a couple of miles."

"I'd appreciate that, Uncle——"

"S-h-h-h-h!" Good Lige half arose and stood staring into the darkness beyond the circle of firelight, and in an instant a giant figure loomed through the shadows and strode swiftly forward.

He was a gaunt, black bearded man, at least six feet three, and with shoulders proportionately broad. A lightning glance seemed sufficient to take in all the details of the camp, and he dropped his repeating rifle into the hollow of his arm and spoke in a soft drawl.

"Evenin', men."

"Howdy, King Hiram," returned Good Lige. "Is thar trouble brewin'?" He nodded toward the rifle.

"Nothin' to speak of. Jest trailin' a varmint who has been prowlin' about my house a leetle too much. See him pass by hyar?"

"No. I ain't seen hide nor hair of a Fralin in a week. Which one was it?" countered Good Lige.

"I'm not shore, but I think 'twas Leetle Alex."

"Purty dangerous business, this follerin' a Fralin' into his own back yard after night," suggested Good Lige, but King Hiram ignored him.

"I'm askin' yore pardon," apologized the giant hillman, turning to O'Hearn, "for eavedroppin' yore talk a while ago, but when I seen the fire I wan't plum certain who 'twas. Ye said ye'd like to talk to me, and I reckon ye'd best do it hyar. Ye're welcome to come to my house any time ye want, but 'tain't exactly safe—if ye're plannin' on runnin' yore line through the Fralin country."

"Is it as bad as that?" demanded Good Lige. "I knowed that trouble was brewin', but I hadn't heard that they had come out in the open."

"Thar's been somebody skulkin' about my place ever since I appealed that case to the supreme cou't. On Sunday evenin' they took a pot shot at Bart at the mouth of Antler Branch, but jest barked his shoulder a leetle."

"I saw Bart this mornin', passin' by here down the river—straight for the Devil's Apron. Leastwise he looked like he was headed thar," declared Good Lige with an intonation that made his statement a plain question.

"He didn't say whar he was goin'," replied King Hiram, "but I figgered he was goin' to send word to my brother, Ansel, over in Kaintucky. I reckon he was headed for the State line." Once more he turned to O'Hearn.

"Well, suh!" He stood waiting respectfully.

"I'm running a line for the railroad through this section," began O'Hearn, wondering just how to word his questions, "and for the last several days I, too, have been watched. Now that we have reached the Devil's Apron country, their vigilance has redoubled until I feel that to go further is endangering the lives of myself and my crew. I was wondering if you could throw any light on this mystery, or maybe suggest a way in which I could go ahead in safety. Do you know why it is that the Fralins are guarding that section so carefully?"

"Just plain Fralin cussedness is all I can say," replied King Hiram without an instant's hesitation. "As far as I know thar's nothin' of value on that land, but they'd ruther die than give it up now. Ye see, thar ain't never been no love lost betwixt the Halls an' Fralins, an' since this lawsuit betwixt me an' Old Alex started a few months ago over some wild land back of his place, the feelin' seems to have been growin' more bitter. Mebbe they think ye're runnin' lines for me—or somethin' like that."

O'Hearn hadn't considered that possibility, and for the space of some thirty seconds he gave it thought, but somehow that explanation did not suffice. There was something else behind those strange movements of the Fralins save merely feudist hate and revenge.

"I'm afraid——"

Something in King Hiram's attitude stayed O'Hearn's words, and the next instant brought action so lightning quick that the engineer was unable to follow it. With the suddenness of a striking catamount King Hiram whirled and fired in the direction of the deeper shadows along the river. Even as his gun flashed he was leaping for the shelter of one of the sycamore trees near Good Lige, and then came two quick stabbing flames from the shadows into which King Hiram had fired, and the giant hillman crumpled at the roots of the tree behind which he had sought cover.

The bewildering rapidity with which the entire happening had taken place left O'Hearn stunned and staring wide eyed into the darkness. Strangely distinct came the sound of splashing in the shallow waters of the river below and then—silence. Good Lige was the first to recover his wits, and he scrambled to his feet and hurried to King Hiram's side.

"Are ye hard hit?" he asked, but received no reply. "Bring a light, somebody, quick!" he cried.

O'Hearn flashed his electric torch, and Good Lige and Granger turned King Hiram's body over. At first glance they thought he was dead, but a closer examination showed that he was still breathing, though faintly. There was a smear of blood on his left cheek, and a spreading splotch on his shirt in the region of his heart.

"Hit with both bullets," ejaculated Good Lige. "Head's barked an' he's plugged two inches over the heart. But I reckon he'll pull through—he's been plugged some afore."

"Who was it?" questioned O'Hearn, half expecting another shot from the darkness.

"'Twas Leetle Alex, of course," returned Good Lige in a matter of fact tone. "Oncommon shootin', that was. Both bullets was within two inches of whar he intended 'em to go, an' he was shootin' from the dark. He's one of the best shots an' the meanest reptile in the Devil's Apron. I've seen him toss a bottle in the air an' bust it the first shot an' get the neck the second shot afore it hit the ground."

During this explanation Good Lige's fingers were busy slitting the shirt away from King Hiram's wound, and stanching the flow of blood with a clean handkerchief. With that injury firmly bound, he turned his attention to the jagged cut across the hillman's head just above the temple, and found it trifling.

IN THE meantime, O'Hearn's cook and the remainder of his crew had gathered closely about the fallen man, and two of them brought out a cot upon which they placed King Hiram. Then O'Hearn glanced at Good Lige questioningly.

"We'll take him up to my place for tonight," replied the latter. "Tomorrow we'll manage to get him home."

"Hadn't one of us better go for a doctor?" queried Granger, as four of the men picked up the cot and moved back toward the house.

"I reckon not," replied Good Lige with a shrug. "I've had a leetle experience along this line, an' I allus keep bandages an' iodine ready. That bullet in his shoulder is a clean wound an' come out behind his shoulder blade. He'll be all right in a month or so."

Half an hour later King Hiram was resting comfortably, and his first thought on recovering consciousness was of his home.

"Bud an' Maida are thar—alone," he half whispered to Good Lige and O'Hearn who stood beside him. "Will ye two—go up thar an' stay the night?" He apparently tried to sit up, but the effort sent him back to his pillow, the blood draining from his face, and a groan of impotency escaping his tightly closed lips.

"Shore!" agreed Good Lige. "Take it easy King Hiram. My two boys an' the rest of the surveying' crew will stay here with ye, an' we'll take care of Maida an' the kid."

"When Bart comes—send him to me," requested King Hiram as they made ready to go, and Good Lige nodded in acquiescence.

Out on the porch, they found that the moon had arisen and was flooding the little valley with a clear light that made objects plainly visible at a distance of thirty or forty yards. Good Lige had caught up a repeating rifle, and he pulled the magazine lever to assure himself that it was loaded.

"Have ye got a gun?" he demanded, turning to O'Hearn.

"It's in my tent."

"In times like these that is danged pore policy," replied Good Lige. "Git it," he ordered succinctly.

Half an hour later they were toiling up a precipitous trail near the crest of Pinnacle Ridge, Good Lige, slightly in the lead, and making absolutely no noise as he followed the obscure path through the huckleberry thickets. Long practiced in stalking wild turkey, he was like a shadow, and there came to O'Hearn memories of the time he was brigaded with an outfit of Anzacs which included a number of the New Zealand Maori recruits. In raids those men had been like will-o'-the-wisps, melting into the shadows, ghostlike, mysterious.

Reaching the crest, they found themselves at the edge of a field, at the other side of which gleamed a light.

"Thar's the house," explained Good Lige in a guarded tone. "Best let me do the explainin' to Maida. She ain't afraid of nothin', an' if she thinks her pa is hurt bad thar ain't nothin' that will keep her from goin' to him."

A couple of hounds burst into vociferous baying before the two men had gotten twenty feet into the field and they kept up a continuous din until Good Lige reached the gate. Apparently they recognized him, for they grew quiet and slunk around the house. Good Lige then crossed the porch and knocked at the door.

"Who is it?" came a firm query from inside.

"It's me, Maida—Lige Cantrell."

Almost instantly the door was opened, and outlined against the light behind her stood a girl, her lips parted, her eyes wide with anxiety and fear.

"What's—what's the matter, Uncle Lige?" she demanded sharply.

"Nothin' to worry about, Maida," replied Good Lige softly. "Yore pa sent me and Mister O'Hearn up here tonight, because he was afraid Bart wouldn't be back an' he didn't want to leave ye an' Bud here alone."

"Why didn't dad come?" Her gaze was centered on Good Lige's face, and O'Hearn knew that she suspected the former of trying to cover the truth. The latter apparently realized the futility of trying to deceive her completely.

"Yore pa got hurt a leetle," he admitted. "But not bad. We'll bring him back here tomorrow."

"I knew it—I knew it." She caught Good Lidge by the arm. "Tell me the truth! How badly is he hurt?"

"Not enough to kill him by a long shot, so don't ye go to worryin'." Good Lige patted her head gently. "He's shot in the shoulder an' his head was scratched. That's all, honey. I'm tellin' ye the whole truth an'——"

"I'll be ready in five minutes—as soon as I can arouse Bud." She hurried toward another room.

"No need of you goin' down thar, Maida," called Good Lige. "He's at my house an' thar's a dozen men thar with him. He told me to tell ye not to come down thar tonight."

She halted in the doorway and stared at the speaker hesitatingly. Then she came back to them slowly.

"But—but he needs me," she persisted, her lips trembling, and a mist of tears clouding her eyes. Then as if ashamed of her exhibition of fear and weakness, she threw up her head defiantly and smiled.

O'Hearn gazed at her in frank admiration. Vivid color, tawny hair in which glinted coppery tints, level gray eyes, and full, firm lips—"superb" was the only word he could find that seemed to fit her. The grasp she gave him, when Uncle Lige had thought to introduce them, was strong, warm and friendly. Glancing downward he saw that he had unconsciously covered their grasp with his left hand, and the realization caused him to stammer his acknowledgment, to experience a diffidence he had not felt since high school days.

FOR an hour they sat before the open fire and O'Hearn found himself wondering how this girl, so isolated in the hill country, could hold her own in poise, and conversational grace and interest with her sisters of any city. There was a piano in one corner of the room, and among those pieces of music on the rack he saw one of Wagner's "Eventide Melodies." In the bookcase beside him were a number of classics. For a time his surprise and admiration kept O'Hearn silent, but at last he joined in and talked a little himself. When she had retired, he sat gazing into the embers building dreams about a pair of level gray eyes, a piled mass of tawny, coppery hair, and a quick, impulsive smile that promised the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

Bud, a lanky youth of approximately ten years of age, with the high cheek bones and black hair of King Hiram, awakened O'Hearn the following morning. Glancing at the bed, he saw that Good Lige had not occupied it and had probably remained on guard throughout the night. O'Hearn found him at the breakfast table when he entered the dining room, and a moment later Maida served them.

As they finished breakfast, Granger and the others arrived with King Hiram, and with them came a youth whose tawny hair and superb proportions identified him to O'Hearn without an introduction. He was Maida's brother, Bart, who moved with a quick, agile step and whose every feature delineated high courage and daring.

Bart and Granger lifted King Hiram to his bed in a room adjoining the living room, and Maida propped him up comfortably with many pillows. Then she dropped to her knees beside him.

"Are—are you all right, dad?" she questioned tremulously.

King Hiram's hand dropped gently on her head.

"Not hurt bad, honey," he replied. "Be out in a month. Don't ye worry none. I've been shot up worse than this afore."

Curiously enough he had repeated almost verbatim the words of Good Lige on the previous night. Then, apparently exhausted, he closed his eyes and all of those in the room save Maida tiptoed outside.

With a quick jerk of his head Bart called O'Hearn out on the porch, beyond earshot of the crowd.

"I take it ye're in charge of the surveyin' party on McLain River," he said in low, resonant tones. O'Hearn nodded.

"Then if ye'll take my advice, ye'll call off yore surveyin' for a few days—till this business is settled one way or t'other."

"Thanks," replied O'Hearn with a shrug. "But I shall go on with the work—unless you have some definite information."

Bart's eyes narrowed.

"I'm tryin' to help ye, man," he said shortly. "Ye done us a good turn last night. Ye can take it or leave it, but I wouldn't 'a' warned ye if I didn't know what I was talkin' about."

"But I'm not going to be bluffed out by a few threats on the part of the Fralins," objected O'Hearn.

"Call it a threat if ye want to," returned Bart evenly, "but Leetle Alex, Ranse an' Cal Fralin have their orders to shoot on sight if ye go any deeper into the Devil's Apron."

"The devil!" ejaculated O'Hearn. "You're certain of this?"

"I don't talk onless I'm shore."

Impulsively O'Hearn offered his hand.

"Sorry," he declared in sincerity. "I appreciate your warning and I shall take your advice. But what I don't understand is why those Fralins are so anxious to keep everyone out of that section."

"I think I know," replied Bart after a short pause. "We'll make certain of what it is as soon as Uncle Anse an' his boys get here. They ought to be here by midday. I'm startin' for Blowin' Rock Gap to meet 'em now. Want to go along?"

"Sure," agreed O'Hearn, "if you have a spare horse. Wait till I talk with my crew a minute."

"They can stay here till this trouble blows over if they want to," invited Bart.

"Granger is a good man in an emergency," replied O'Hearn. "I'll have him remain, but the others I'll head back for the camp."

TEN minutes later O'Hearn and Bart were descending a tortuous trail off Pinnacle Ridge, in the opposite direction from McLain River, through a forest that seemed illimitable, stretching back to the crest of the Cumberlands which marked the State line. An hour's ride brought them to the gap. And there they waited until the noon hour, but Anse and his sons failed to put in appearance.

At last Bart swung back to his saddle.

"Somethin's delayed 'em," he asserted with conviction. "We might as well ride on home. They'll come as soon's they can."

In single file, because of the narrowness of the trail, they returned home silently; but the moment they entered the clearing about King Hiram's cabin, Bart sensed trouble and spurred his horse to a gallop. Good Lige met him and O'Hearn at the gate, and a glance at the old hillman's face showed that he was laboring under tense emotion.

"Whar's Maida?" he demanded sharply.

"Maida?" Bart stared at the old man bewilderedly. "Ain't she here?"

"Hell's in the saddle, Bart, an' I suspicioned it at the beginnin'," declared Good Lige, coming closer. "About two hours after ye left here this mornin' Silent Sim sneaked in an' told us that ye an' O'Hearn had been bushwhacked by the Fralins, an' that ye was both hurt bad. Said that ye had beat off the skunks, but that ye needed help quick. Thar wa'n't nobody here but me an' Granger. The rest had gone back down on the creek. I sent him after 'em an' they ought to be here by now. Whilst I was out thar on the ridge tryin' to signal to my boys, Maida an' Bud must 'a' gone to help ye, because when I got back they wa'n't here an' thar's two hosses missin' at the barn."

Bart heard him through, his face a mask, stoically hiding the play of emotions that shook him. O'Hearn for the moment failed to grasp the meaning of Good Lige's words. Was Maida lost? Maybe there was another trail and they had passed each other somewhere back toward the gap. But Bart's next words dispelled all doubts.

"The damned sneakin' coperhead!" he burst out, and in his tones was a metallic note that was deadly. "He's in the pay of the Fralins—an' him a Hall."

O'Hearn, through Good Lige, had heard of Silent Sim Hall, the enigma of the Cumberlands, a character so strange that there were those among the hillmen who frankly leagued him with the devil. According to Good Lige, Silent Sim was a "yarb doctor" whose comings and goings were a mystery to all save himself. Some declared that he was a spotter for the revenue officers; yet many of them knew that he operated a still himself. Through his expressionless face and slitted eyes no one was ever able to fathom the thoughts that seemed to seethe behind them. Usually he wore moccasins with the heels in front to enable him to deceive his trackers, and always he carried a huge pair of field glasses. He rarely ever spoke, except when spoken to directly and even then his reply was apt to be irrelevant and enigmatical.

Unable to believe that which he knew to be true, O'Hearn leaned forward and touched Good Lige's shoulder.

"Do you mean it was a trick to get Maida in the hands of the Fralins?" he queried. "Surely they don't make war on women!"

"Ye don't know the Fralins," grunted Good Lige, malediction in every syllable.

"But—but what for?"

"Hold her till King Hiram drops the suit for that land," replied Good Lige succinctly, and then turned to Bart.

"What's yore plans, Bart?"

Bart hesitated for the fraction of an instant. Then he spoke with decision.

"Get together all the men ye can an' then head for the Devil's Apron. Listen for my signal when ye get thar."

"Ye goin' in thar alone, Bart?" questioned Good Lige.

"Yeah," drawled the youth, turning and striding toward the house.

O'Hearn followed him and found him filling his pockets with cartridges from a box beside the rack that held a half a dozen rifles of various makes.

"May I take one of these, Bart?" he asked, and the latter nodded.

"Any objection if I go along with you?"

Bart shot a keen glance at the engineer.

"Chances are ag'inst comin' out—on yore feet," he said in a matter of fact tone.

"I'm going anyway," declared O'Hearn, reaching for some cartridges. "You might as well let me go with you."

"Then, let's go!"

Outside, Bart stopped for a word with Good Lige, and then they plunged swiftly off the mountain, along what was known as the "back trail", in the direction of the piled masses of precipices and heavy growth of black pines which marked the Devil's Apron.

ONCE in the vicinity of the bluff where O'Hearn had halted work on the evening before, they slowed their pace, Bart in the lead, moving from cover to cover without the rustling of a leaf to mark his passing. Following him, O'Hearn wondered at the ease and agility with which the young hillman threaded the dense thickets, so alert that surprise would be almost impossible.

With extraordinary caution Bart, crawling for the last twenty yards, led the way out on top of a long, serrated ridge which overlooked the entire Devil's Apron country. Wildest nature, painted in bold stroke, spread out in the form of a network of high ridges and deep cañons, densely forested, yet relieved here and there by small patches of cleared land that marked the homesteads of the members of the Fralin clan.

"Thar's Big Alex's place," whispered Bart, pointing toward a clearing far back to the right, nestling up against the very wall of the mountain that enclosed the basin on that side. "Up thar, back of his place, jest above that first line of cliffs, is that land which brought about this trouble."

"Where do you think they've taken Maida?" queried O'Hearn.

"When they come back from that Blowin' Rock Gap trail this mornin'," explained Bart through tightened lips, "they cut through that second saddle up thar." He jerked his rifle barrel in the direction of the disputed land. "Whatever it is they are so worked up about, 'tis in that deep ravine whar the shadows are blackest—out thar to the left of them cliffs. They got a log shanty up thar, an' that's right whar Maida an' Bud are, I'm shore of that."

"But how are we going to get in there?" demanded O'Hearn, gazing questioningly at the sheer precipices that seemed to surround it.

"They're goin' to figger on us comin' through that saddle in full force, an' that's whar they're guardin' with most of their men. Our best chance is to slip in through Big Alex's place. They ain't goin' to figger on that. An' we'll be lucky if we get past without bein' seen. They ain't takin' no chances."

Since the clumps of hemlock trees afforded perfect cover, and the needles under foot gave off no sound, they descended by way of a steep bluff and succeeded in reaching a position within a few hundred yards of Big Alex's clearing without any particular difficulty. Then through a more sparsely covered woodland which skirted the fields they crept, yard by yard, sometimes halting for a period of several minutes, peering through the bushes at the rambling log structure which was the home of the chief of the Fralin clan.

Once past the house they slipped down into a deep ravine and followed the course of a tricklet of water back toward the line of precipices which marked the lower boundary line of the disputed land. Just above them on the bank was a well-defined trail over which the Fralins apparently traveled much, and when Bart reached a point where that trail crossed the ravine, he halted.

"They've got this trail guarded," he whispered, "an' we can't rush it. It looks like it's up to us to locate some other way to get in. The laurel's thickest out this way." He melted into the bushes toward the left and O'Hearn closed in quickly behind him.

Up the broken wall of a precipice, in the crevices of which sprouted thick clumps of laurel, they made their slow and precarious advance. At times it was hand over hand work, clinging to a projecting stone here, a bit of ivy or laurel there, and all the while tensing themselves for the attack they expected each momentary exposure to bring. In this manner they at last reached the crest and lay panting, buried in a thicket of wild gooseberry vines.

Through a natural vista, they could see for a distance of three or four hundred yards ahead, and as they peered intently in that direction there came the unmistakable odor of souring mash and wood smoke.

"They've got a still in operation," whispered Bart. "It's in that leetle draw to the right. Hold! I see it." For a long minute he lay motionless, and at last he drew a deep breath. "Thar's five or six Fralins at the still," he declared speculatively. "One out to our right, an' mebbe six or seven up along the top of the ridge. Twelve to fifteen in all. If Uncle Anse an' his boys get here. . . ."

Inch by inch he began wriggling through the gooseberry bushes working gradually to the left until he had at last reached the protection of a bed of rhododendron through which he crept with the stealth of a stalking bobcat. Fifty yards from the still he turned abruptly to the left, and O'Hearn, glancing upward, saw a cabin, almost completely screened by a hemlock grove, looming over them. Near the door, seated on a stump not twenty yards away, sat a small bearded figure which O'Hearn instinctively knew to be the man who had shot King Hiram—Little Alex.

LITTLE ALEX was staring down in the direction of the still, and a sudden commotion in that direction attracted O'Hearn's attention. Apparently a visitor or a messenger had just arrived, for all the men were gathered about him, all palpably interested and several trying to talk at the same time. Little Alex arose and hurried down to them.

"Now's our chance," whispered Bart, and suiting word to action, he crouched beneath the rhododendron branches and dashed toward the cabin. An instant later they turned the corner and were safely hidden behind it. There was no door nor window along the rear wall, but Bart reached down and with a single heave of his powerful shoulders, he wrenched aside one of the large slabs with which the cabin had been hurriedly constructed, and through the aperture he wormed his way inside.

"Bart!" There came a low cry from within the building. "You—you aren't hurt?" It was Maida's voice, tense with emotion and relief.

At that instant, O'Hearn stepped through the opening, and the tremulous smile of happiness she gave him sent his own heart pounding furiously.

Bart slipped toward the opening near the door and shot a quick glance down toward the still and what he saw there apparently was not reassuring. With a single stride he was back again.

"Outside, quick!" he ordered. "We've got a chance."

It was the work of a tense instant to slip through the opening and into the cover of the friendly thicket a few feet from the wall. Bart had caught Bud in his arms and O'Hearn leaped forward to offer his assistance to Maida, but she shook her head grimly and plunged forward in such a manner that showed she was able to care for herself. Evidently Bart knew of some secret path back up the mountainside, for he did not even pause as he turned abruptly upward in the face of a shale littered embankment. O'Hearn followed, giving a large part of his attention to the back trail in order to cover their flight.

Just before they gained the top of the embankment a startled cry echoed up from the ravine below. A cry that could mean but one thing—the escape had been discovered. O'Hearn crouched, peering back toward the cabin, his rifle in readiness for a quick shot, but Bart had other plans.

"In here, quick!" he called, making no effort to keep the Fralins from hearing. With one hand he swung Maida across the top of the embankment and she disappeared from view, and then O'Hearn scrambled quickly to his side.

Bud and Maida were huddled back in what appeared to be the mouth of a mine, in front of which had been thrown a pile of black rock or ore. The mine extended back only a few feet, but a single glance was enough to tell O'Hearn that it was an admirable position for defense, protected from both above and below. Stepping back into this cover he glanced questioningly about him. The black substance with which the mountain seemed to be composed attracted his curiosity and he stooped and picked up a piece. Then he gave expression to a low whistle of surprise.

"What is it?" queried Maida, and Bart half whirled from his position behind the débris where he was peering across the sights of his rifle.

"Manganese—manganese dioxide" replied O'Hearn. "Why Good Lord! It's worth—I haven't an idea how much it is worth. No wonder the Fralins wanted it."

"Manganese?" Maida touched the wall wonderingly. "What's it used for?"

"Chiefly in steel manufacture. It looks to be eighty per cent pure and at a guess I'd say the deposit is almost inexhaustible."

Then quite without warning a rifle exploded not a hundred feet away and a shower of gravel and ore spurted up from the barricade near Bart. Instinctively O'Hearn ducked low and forced Maida to a position beside him. Bud was crawling toward the barricade near Bart.

"Here young man," grunted O'Hearn, catching him by the foot and drawing him back within the safety zone. "You stay back here under cover."

Bud obeyed sullenly and O'Hearn crawled forward and crouched beside Bart, slipping the barrel of his rifle between two small lumps of the manganese.

Stare as he might into the foliage below, he was unable to distinguish anything that looked like a Fralin. Save for that one shot, everything was as quiet and peaceful as it looked. But O'Hearn knew that the slightest exposure would bring a bullet from a gun that rarely missed.

"Thar's one behind that crooked pine," whispered Bart after several seconds of intense silence, "an' another over against that mossy rock to the left. I reckon some of 'em are tryin' to come in on us from above, but they won't try anything much till after dark. Jest keep yore eyes peeled for them two down thar."

MINUTE after minute passed and still the hidden Fralins remained under cover, evidently respecting Bart's rifle. As yet only the one shot had been fired and apparently the attackers had decided upon a waiting policy. A glance at Bart showed O'Hearn that the young hillman had not relaxed his vigilance in the slightest but that his roving eyes were missing nothing.

O'Hearn looked at his watch and with a start realized that it was nearly five o'clock. The sun was dipping behind the crest of the Cumberlands to their left and the blue shadows of late afternoon were deepening in the lower ravines. Darkness came with startling suddenness in those hills, the hour between sunset and night being unusually short. And it was a matter of only a short while until the mantle of darkness would be sufficient to cover the advance of the Fralins. There could be only one result in the face of such odds.

Bart was thinking of the same thing, as evidenced by his next actions.

"We've got to have help before it gets dark," he said in a guarded tone. "That bunch of hounds'll be in on us in a pack soon's it gets too dark to shoot. Onless Good Lige an' the boys, or Uncle Anse an' his boys get here soon, our cake's dough. We'll jest have to make a run for it, an' the chances are jest about fifty to one ag'inst us."

O'Hearn shot an apprehensive glance back toward the girl, fearful that she had overheard Bart. But if she had she gave no indication of it. She was talking to Bud, palpably trying to allay his fears, although the strained, tense expression on her own face betrayed the trepidation and alarm that was hers. With an effort he resisted the impulse to go to her, to take her in his arms, and to protect her—to the last minute.

A look at the tawny, tigerlike Bart reassured him. For in the latter's face was an expression of devil-may-care courage, mixed with cool capability and high daring. With a puzzled expression O'Hearn watched the latter as he dropped back to a sitting posture, with his back to the wall of manganese, and unloaded his rifle. Placing the muzzle of the empty barrel to his lips he blew a mellow resounding blast, like the note of a clarinet, which echoed and reechoed across the Devil's Apron. It was a long drawn, mournful wail, somehow seeming to O'Hearn to sound like it came from another world, the cry of a lost soul in Gehenna. And he rubbed his eyes in amazement.

Again Bart sent out his lonely, carrying appeal, and it was only then that O'Hearn recognized it as a signal to Good Lige and his men, to lead them to their assistance. Bart dropped the gun to his knees and listened eagerly for a reply. But none came. They were too far away to hear it, or else they didn't dare reply. Then at intervals of ten minutes Bart repeated his call, sending those pleading signals reverberating weirdly down the pine studded cañons to the McLain River several miles away. And still there came no reply.

As the shadows deepened into dusk and the outlines of the trees in the ravine below them became more indistinct and grotesque, O'Hearn grew more vigilant. He was aware of someone coming in close beside him, but so engrossed was he in watching a clump of bushes in which he thought he saw a lurking movement that he paid no attention. At last, assured that it was a man crawling to a vantage point on a high bank opposite the mine, O'Hearn threw a snap shot at him, and had the satisfaction of seeing that Fralin roll swiftly into the cover of the boulders from which he had advanced.

With a suppressed laugh he turned to his companion and saw that it was Maida.

"You—you shouldn't be here," he said swiftly. "Go back into the opening with Bud."

"No." She shook her head obdurately. "Give me your revolver. I can help."

"Don't worry, dear," he whispered with a confidence he did not feel. "We'll beat those devils at their own game yet."

She swayed slightly toward him and smiled. There was no fear in the glance she gave him, but into those eyes there crept a welling softness that caused him to drop one arm about her shoulders and draw her more closely to him. She made no effort to hide the message her face told him. The stark realities stripped them of all conventional subterfuges and laid their hearts bare.

Almost savagely he thrust her from him and tensed in every muscle, crouched, awaiting the attack which he wanted to come soon. The suspense of waiting through the interminable minutes was becoming unbearable. To meet those hillmen in the open, to come to grips with them and settle the business once and for all, would have been a welcome relief.

ONCE more Bart was sending out his plaintive call, and from somewhere back in the hills came the cry of an owl to its mate. That was all—except the silences and they seemed never ending. Ten minutes more would bring the dusk—and the Fralins.

"Might as well get ready to make a break for it," whispered Bart, whose indomitable courage seemed to be sinking. "Uncle Anse an' Good Lige couldn't make it in time. I'm goin' to empty my revolver into them bushes an' make 'em cover up. When I give the word, take Maida an' make a dash for it toward that bluff over thar." He pointed a steady finger toward the silhouette of several giant pines against the sky.

Then, like a living thing, Bart's revolver went into action, the explosions rolling into a continuous crash and the quick, stabbing flames quite distinct against the gathering dusk. He was answered by a few scattering shots and a yell. Then, before the echoes had died away, Bart leaped to his feet.

"Now!" he cried, throwing two quick shots from his rifle into the ravine, and at the same instant O'Hearn caught Maida's hand. But before he could make a dash from the mouth of the mine, there came a sound that caused him to pause and stare at Bart wonderingly. It was a reply to Bart's signal, a weird wail, coming from the shadows behind the Fralins.

"It—it's Uncle Anse and his boys," gasped Maida. "They've come. They've come."

Bart crouched behind the barricade and

peered into the darkness for an instant. Then he came to his feet.

"Stay here!" he ordered. "All of ye!"

With a single bound he cleared the barricade, and firing as he went, he charged straight into the Fralins' covert. Then a fusillade opened from the opposite side of the ravine and soon became general. O'Hearn glanced at Maida, mutely imploring, and she nodded. The next instant he was plunging down the shale embankment on Bart's heels, pumping bullets into a thicket from which came several darting flames, and then Good Lige and the others closed in from the opposite side. A few spasmodic shots and the fight was over.

Out of the dense thickets came half a score of the Fralins with their hands over their heads, unarmed. The sudden, fierce attack had so bewildered them that they had done what few Fralins had ever done—surrendered to a Hall. Behind them stalked Good Lige, and a dozen hillmen, one of whom O'Hearn instinctively recognized as Anse, King Hiram's brother. With him were five grim youths, tall, gaunt, and dark.

"The Kentucky Halls," whispered Granger to O'Hearn a moment later. "I'd sure hate to be a Fralin."

Bart seemed to take in the situation at a glance, and he assumed leadership, this being apparently expected of him.

"All right, ye Fralins," he declared, his voice a staccato bark. "Ye've done yore do in the Devil's Apron. Ye've got twelve hours to cross the State line, an' some of us are goin' to stay with ye till ye do it. The first one that crosses it ag'in, 'twill be his last time. Is that understood?"

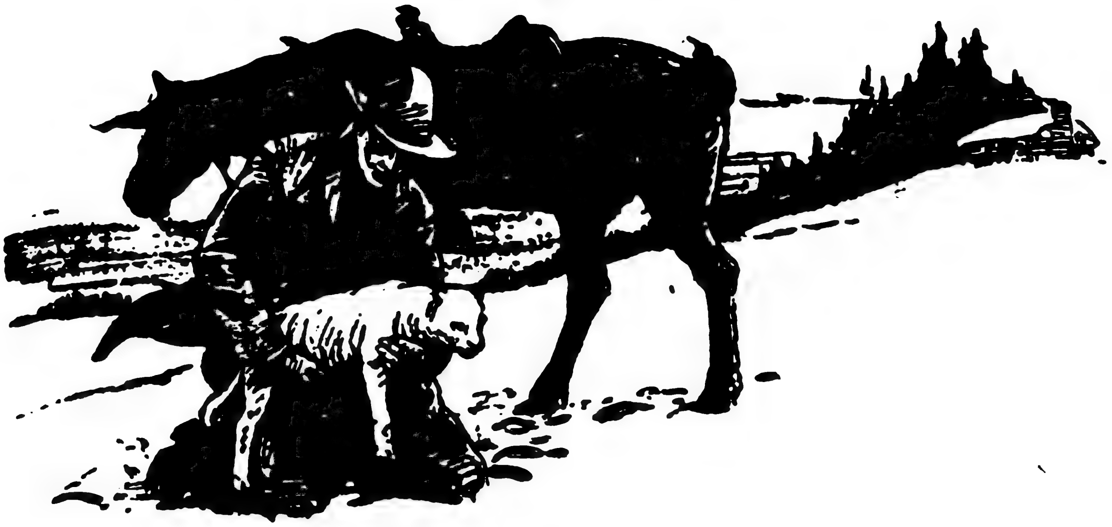
It was more than they expected and Big Alex was quick to accept the terms. Silently they filed out of the ravine, accompanied by Anse, his sons and a sprinkling of others whom Good Lige had brought. O'Hearn scrambled back up the bank to the mouth of the mine where Maida met him, fearful of the news he was bringing.

"Nobody really hurt," he assured her. "Come!" He held out his arms to her as she stood on the barricade, and lightly she leaped past him.

Half an hour later they stood in the gap high up on the crest overlooking the Devil's Apron, which was flooded with the silvery light of the low hanging moon. O'Hearn and Maida stood together, gazing at the complete change which had come over the Devil's Apron, making it a thing of beauty and peace instead of a battle ground of hate and avarice.

"I have about two more weeks of work before I finish the line through there." His arm swept vaguely across the mysteriously softened hills. "When I complete it, may I come to you?"

For reply she turned and caught the lapels of his coat, and the star points in her eyes rivaled those above the low hanging moon high up over the Devil's Apron.



PRAIRIE NEIGHBORS

A Deeply Moving Story of the Lonely Homesteads

By ELVIRA PENNELL ROBERTS

McWHIRTER dug fiercely away at the thick frost on the window, trying to make a hole large enough to give him one peep out at the prairie beyond. It was discouraging work, for the hole froze over faster than knife and hot breath could clear it away. The air-tight in one end of the room warmed a space a few feet around it, but even its red hot intensity could not penetrate to that window, with the blizzard howling outside. McWhirter turned away with a sigh and walked feebly to the couch he had moved close to the stove.

The pain in his chest nagged away and occasionally came with such fierceness it caught his breath. He raised his head to look at the coal box behind the stove. It was half full. There would be enough to last until morning, at least. After that . . . He thought of the drifts piling between the house and the coal shed. If he were well, it would be a man sized job to clear the way. He groaned as a gripping pain seized his chest, and drew the blanket closer.

He turned his head toward the window. It was five o'clock by the alarm clock on the shelf beside it, and growing dark outside, but if he could only see out to know whether Jim Belcher's light twinkled across the coulée. His fleece lined coat, hanging on its peg near the window, swung back and forth in the draft. A faint sound from a box beside the stove brought McWhirter slowly to his feet. He staggered to the box and took off the old coat he had thrown over it, bent and examined the little lamb inside. It breathed feebly. McWhirter warmed the coat at the stove and wrapped it closely around the lamb. He opened the stove and threw in a hod of coal, lighted the bracket lamp on the wall; then, gasping from his exertion, fell back on the couch. For a minute, everything grew dark.

Another sharp pain brought returning consciousness. With it, came the remembrance of the morning. It had opened warm and bright; a return of Indian summer, McWhirter had thought, as he opened the ranch-house door and looked out over the prairie. The tall, coarse grass waved over the land in warm brown and gold billows, as it reflected the sunlight; there was a lazy hesitancy in the breeze. Overhead, two lines of wild geese, converging to the call of their raucous leader, flew southward. McWhirter stood and watched them.

As far as he could see, the geese and the smoke rising from the stovepipe sticking through Jim Belcher's shack roof, a mile away, were the only signs of life. He frowned as he watched the smoke. It would be a good day, he thought, to stretch the last length of fence between him and that renegade homesteader and sheepman.

As McWhirter worked busily with post hole digger and wire stretcher, he grew so warm that he doffed his coat and then straightened stiffly to wipe the sweat from underneath his woolen cap. A drawling voice behind him startled him.

"Fine day, ain't it, Mister McWhirter?" He turned. Jim Belcher, long, lean and hungry looking, stood smilingly regarding him, at his heels a shepherd dog, as lean and hungry looking as himself. McWhirter grunted and resumed his work. Belcher cleared his throat and began again.

"I done heard tell as you all wa'n't favorable to homesteaders, Mister McWhirter, but I kind of thought, seein' as we're livin' so close, 'twouldn't be no more than neighborly to say howdy once in a while."

McWhirter worked on, his frown growing heavier. Still he did not reply.

"I kind of thought," Belcher went on, "maybe you'd rent this slope of land that jines on mine there. A quarter section ain't much to graze sheep on. Course, I hain't got many yet, but I aim to get more come spring. And then I thought to fetch my wife, Marthy——"

"Look here, Belcher," McWhirter rose to his feet and faced his caller, "you might just as well know that the farther neighbors get from me, the better I'm pleased. I settled in this part of the country to get away from folks. The people who live around here know it and stay away. You're the first to settle at my gates, and if there's anything on God's earth I hate worse than a homesteader, it's a sheepman. I'm putting up this fence to keep your damned sheep off that slope. If I see one of 'em here again, the next time you come calling you'd better bring your gun."

During this ultimatum Belcher stared, then swallowed hard, the while the slow red made redder his sunburned face. At its end, he called:

"Come, Shep. It's darned sure we ain't wanted here."

Then he turned and walked away. Something about his tall, awkward figure, shambling down the hill, gave McWhirter a queer feeling, as he sent one sneering glance after him.

As he fastened the last fence staple and turned to pick up his tools, McWhirter shivered and looked around him. The sun had grown dim. It shone through gray, vapory clouds, and small particles of snow came flying about him, borne by a buffeting wind. He went quickly to his horse, who stood, reins dangling, his back turned to the oncoming gale. He was pawing nervously, anxious to be away.

McWhirter scanned the clouds.

"Some storm coming," he muttered, "but we'll have plenty of time."

He tied his tools to the saddle and mounted. As he rode toward the ranchhouse, the snow came faster and faster. He hugged the side of the coulée. He would leave it at the point nearest the house, he had decided. Suddenly he heard a sharp bark from the opposite side of the draw. A coyote, he knew. Then, distinctly, he heard the pitiful bleat of a lamb. He shrugged.

"Too bad for the lamb," he thought, and went on.

Another rod and a sudden vision of that lank, ungainly figure came to him, and then he heard again that pitiful bleat... No, he couldn't have heard it this far away. It must be his imagination. Oh, the devil! Why couldn't he get a move on him and get home. With a jerk he turned the horse about into the face of the storm. It was thickening every minute, but he could still see. He urged his horse across the draw; there was a crack of his gun, and then a yap-yap disappearing in the whirling snow.

McWhirter got off his horse and knelt on the fast whitening ground. There had been two of them; little fellows. The coyote had finished one, all right. The other bleated dismally. McWhirter picked it up and, tucking it under his coat, remounted and turned toward home.

By this time the snow came in a blinding whirl. It was hard and needlelike and stung his face cruelly. McWhirter gave his horse its head. After what seemed hours of wandering, with all sense of direction gone, no up nor down even, in this space of whirling snow, the house suddenly appeared before them; a dark wall rising up from the earth to stop their way.

McWhirter managed to make a fire, to snatch a bit of food, and then to fight his way to his barns and sheds to feed his shivering horses and cattle. As he lay fighting the periods of unconsciousness that came at shorter and shorter intervals, he was glad he had fed the stock. They could last quite a while, now. And the lamb . . . He smiled grimly. The lamb would last longer then he could, perhaps. It was well covered, had been fed and it was not sick, only chilled. He must fix the fire again. He was glad there was plenty of coal. He had filled the box when he first began to chill so. He tried to raise himself and fell back as the darkness closed over him.

The hours drifted by while McWhirter gasped for breath on the couch near the fast dying fire. Night came and the cold cracked and snapped as it took firmer and firmer hold of the frame building. The lamb gave an uncomfortable bleat. Hearing it, McWhirter half rose in his delirium. His blanket slipped part way to the floor, and he fell back again on his pillow.

Outside, the snow whirled and drifted, but toward morning, the wind changed, the snow stopped falling and the stars came out to shine on a world of heavy whiteness.

IN THE shack at the foot of the mile long slope, a slope so gradual that one did not realize the climb until the top was reached, Jim Belcher huddled close to his monkey stove through the long night. The wind blew between the cracks of the rough board sides in spite of the tar paper covering. It blew against the building paper inside and bellied it out from the two-by-fours. The snow sifted in a little under the door when a gust came that way. Shep came whining to him and crouched close to his knees. Jim had to sit very close to the fire to get the warmth, but he looked at the full coal box with satisfaction and patted Shep.

A sudden gust of wind loosened the fastening of the door and blew it open. Shep started up with a growl. Jim went quickly to fasten it. It had cleared outside, except for the occasional gusts of eddying snow, and Jim looked toward McWhirter's at the top of the rise. A light twinkled there.

"Strange!" he thought, as he shut the door and went back to his seat by the fire.

Another hour, two, he sat, feeding his tiny stove, his shoulders bent over its comforting warmth, his thoughts going back over the day. Too bad, he thought, that he had settled here. Everything was going as well as he could expect . . . He thought of the small flock of sheep, safely housed in the shed. Another year, what with the increase and wool going up, as they said, he could build a better house and send for Martha. It wouldn't be much; but she'd like it better than working out, and picking cotton in Arkansas. But they'd have to get on without neighbors. McWhirter owned everything north and, if homesteaders didn't come in to the south. . . .

The door shook, threatening to loosen the fastening again. He wondered why he was so restless, why the memory of that light bothered him. He rose and opened the door. Yes, it was still there. He couldn't remember ever having seen one there before during the night. Its gleam had always seemed neighborly, friendly, and he had grown to watch for its lighting, its final winking out. He went back to his seat.

A little before the day came on, Jim stirred from the doze into which he had fallen, drew the coffeepot to the front of the stove and filled it with water from the bucket on the bench under the window. A thin skim of ice covered the bucket. After he had breakfasted, and fed Shep, he fought his way to the shed where his sheep huddled in a bleating pile. As he dug his way through the drifts, he looked again toward McWhirter's. The light was still there, shining faintly now in its struggle against the dawn.

Jim saddled his one old horse, wound his long woolen scarf closely about his head, buttoned his old leather coat, and calling "Come on, Shep," slowly mounted and turned the horse's head up the hill.

After plowing through the heavy drifts for several minutes, he came to an abrupt stop. *"The next time you come calling you'd better bring your gun,"* rang through his ears, as if he still stood beside McWhirter by the line of barb wire fence. He stood a moment, then turning, he retraced his steps. From just within the door, he picked up his old shotgun, placed it across the saddle and went on, breaking a way through the mile of heavy snow between his shack and McWhirter's.

Jim knocked hesitatingly on the door, then, as no answer came, he knocked harder. Still, there was no answer. He tried the door. It yielded easily and, pushing it gently, inch by inch, he looked inside. The room was gray and bleak. The stove was cold, the light still burned, and a sickening smell of kerosene filled the air. McWhirter lay uncovered on his couch, his face turned away, his blanket on the floor. There was no doubt of his condition. Jim could hear his heavy breathing, his spasmodic gasps, from the doorway.

He stepped inside and placed the gun carefully against the wall, picked up the blanket and laid it over McWhirter, then turned his attention to the building of a fire. A movement in the box by the stove caught his attention. He bent and turned back the old coat.

"I'm a son-of-a-gun," he muttered, half under his breath. "If he found any of 'em on his place, I was to fetch my gun."

He glanced toward the old gun resting against the wall, then turned a pitying, comprehending look on McWhirter. He unwound his muffler; took off his coat and went to work.

FOR two days Jim rode his old horse up and down the hill, through the drifts, between his shack and McWhirter's house; feeding the stock at both places, tending the fires and nursing his delirious patient. The remembrance of the homely remedies used by his New England mother in bringing up her brood in the Arkansas backwoods, came to his aid now: onion poultices, heated blankets and flatirons, cloths wrung from boiling water; all applied with a tender patience which knew no relaxation.

The second night was the worst. Jim fought with all there was in him. At last, toward morning, McWhirter's fever broke; he breathed easier and slept. Jim, in the big chair by the fire, awoke from the sleep into which he had fallen, to find McWhirter's eyes fixed on him curiously. Then, as understanding came into them, he turned his head and slipped his hand under his pillow for his gun. He managed to bring it out and started to raise himself on one elbow, but the heavy gun slipped from his weak fingers and clattered to the floor, and he fell back. At his first move, however, Jim reached for his old shotgun and brought it to his lap.

"If there's to be any shootin', neighbor, I reckon I'll do it. But I'd hate to shoot anything I've worked over like I've worked over you."

A groan from McWhirter was his only answer. Jim rose and picked up McWhirter's .45 and laid it on the table. Then he went about his work, McWhirter's eyes following him, questioningly, moodily. When he came to the bed with a bowl of broth, McWhirter started to push him away feebly.

"Look here, neighbor, what's the use actin' the fool? If I could get anyone else to take care of you, I'd be glad to get out of your sight, seein' it gets you so riled up. But you know well enough there ain't nobody nigher than Sansarc, and that's twenty good miles of drifts. You eat this and you'll get strong enough in a day or two to get rid of me for good. I promise I'll not bother you none after that."

McWhirter took the bowl and said nothing. Not one word, thus far, had he permitted himself to this interfering neighbor of his, but his eyes followed him about continually, seeking, questioning.

The next day, he suddenly asked:

"Where's the lamb?"

Jim grinned.

"Home with its mother, where it ought to been all along. Sorry, neighbor, it broke the rule so soon. When they're little like that, it's hard to keep 'em inside fences."

There was silence for a time. Then McWhirter spoke again, his eyes fixed curiously on Jim.

"Just why do you do all this? Do you think I'm going to pay you?"

Jim straightened resentfully; his pale blue eyes flashed fire.

"Neighbor, if you wasn't a sick man, I'd answer you quick enough on that. Down where I come from, neighbors don't ask pay for doin' their duty by one another. Besides, you ain't near so hardboiled as you pretend. I've found that out."

"What makes you say that?" McWhirter's mouth set in a grim line. "I certainly haven't encouraged neighbors. I've had my fill of them." He turned his face away.

Jim leaned over the fire to replenish it.

"Mebbe so. Still, I can read signs. I come from the woods where they go by 'em. I remember what you said about sheep and I come up here and find my lamb covered up by your fire. And next day, Shep uncovers the bones of a dead one on that coulée slope. And not more than twenty feet away is a dead coyote, shot plumb through the neck. His skin's dryin' on a board down at my shack this minute. There wasn't anybody around here to pick up that lamb or shoot that coyote but you. It ain't hard to do that kind of figurin'. And you said you hated sheep!"

McWhirter laughed sarcastically.

"I think I said I hated sheepmen. I had one for a neighbor once, and I've good reason to remember it. I haven't wanted neighbors since."

Jim rose.

"Well, I reckon you don't have to have 'em. I kind of think you can get along without me in the house from now on. I'll keep on feedin' the stock for a few days. And if you need anything perticular, you can get me when I go to your barns. You're all fixed for tonight, and I reckon you'll be strong enough to get up in the mornin'."

He looked about the room to see if anything was left undone, then picked up his gun, which still leaned against the wall, and left.

For several days after that, he came to the barns, but avoided the house. McWhirter made no sign. A chinook had melted the snow on the trails, and the drifts on the slope were disappearing. The tallest stalks of the bunch grass stuck through in brown bunches against the white expanse.

ONE morning, Jim suddenly appeared in the house door as McWhirter was struggling to get into his boots.

"I came to tell you that I cain't come tomorrow. I thought, maybe, you'd be well enough to do the feedin' and I'm drivin' my sheep in to Sansarc in the mornin'. There's a feller in there wants to buy my relinquishment, too. He won't keep sheep. He wants to file, just to prove up and sell, I reckon. So you won't catch cold savin' his lambs."

McWhirter's face slowly reddened. He fussed with his boots. Jim watched him for a minute and then turned and strode out through the door.

That night, as Jim washed his dishes and placed them neatly on the rough board shelves of the corner cupboard, he heard the tread of a horse's hoofs. A shadow passed his window. It could be no one but McWhirter. Jim's face relaxed into a slow, pleased grin. He waited, but no knock followed. He heard the horse cropping the dry grass in front of the shack. What was the matter with the man? Why didn't he knock, or come in?

Jim hesitated a minute longer, then went to the door to look out. Almost at his feet, in the thick grass beside the doorstep, lay McWhirter, a huddled bunch of overcoat and coonskin cap. Jim struck a match and, after one look at the white face before him, braced his slight figure to the task of pulling the heavy form of McWhirter inside.

"The damned fool!" he muttered, as he worked over him and felt the heavy gun thrust through McWhirter's belt. "He couldn't wait for me to get out. He had to tote that gun here to run me out, weak as he is. It's a good thing Marthy and me cain't settle here. I don't want no neighbor like this one."

Suddenly he felt McWhirter's eyes on him. He lay looking, questioning, as he had those long days in the house on the hill. He must have heard.

"You all right now?" Jim asked, but his old easy smile was gone.

McWhirter did not reply at once. When he did, his words came slowly, reluctantly, as if it was not his weakness alone that made them falter.

"You stay. Send for—your wife. I hated folks, but—can't get along—without that light. We'll be—neighbors."

Jim's old grin slowly dawned on his responsive face, grew, became one expansive glow. He caught and wrung McWhirter's hand.

"Neighbors! Gosh darn, if neighbors wasn't the only thing I wanted here, next to Marthy!"

Everybody's
Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

FLATTERY

I AM ordinarily just as susceptible to flattery as the next man; no more, I think, and no less. The morning mail brings many letters mighty pleasant to read. I like to read them. But two letters reached my desk within a few days of each other lately which possess a very special power to move me.

They were both from penitentiary convicts in prisons far removed from here. One is a four-time loser on a ten year stretch. The other is a lifer. They have given me no permission to discuss them individually, so I shall not identify them further.

Each man wanted advice of a sort I am adapted by circumstances to give. They wanted to know something about this business of writing. They offered to show me what stuff they had, and to take without flinching whatever harsh judgment I might render. They asked me no favors by reason of their misfortune. They made a straightforward request and left me to do as I pleased about it.

I answered them both. I gave them exactly what they wanted, and did not mince matters in telling them what they were up against. They are not educated men, beyond what observation has taught them. They knew nothing of the gruelling trade they wanted to adopt. They had handicaps that would cause a cloistered professor of rhetoric to swoon dead away at sight. And they took what I gave them and came back for more.

These are men. I don't care what they did; they are paying their debt to society now, and some day the account will be closed. They are unassailably honest in the sense that they want to write without compromise out of the raw life that is in them. I have seen their stuff, and have judged it to the best of my ability. If it were hopeless I would have told them so in no uncertain terms. But it is good stuff. It is splendid stuff. Some day it will carry their names far beyond the solitary acquaintance of one editor to whom they came in doubt and honest wonder and who told them to go ahead. Some day they will be able to forget what has gone before and know the pride of achievement and the satisfaction of the world's esteem.

And when that happens, I shall look back and realize that I know what genuine flattery is.

TORPEDOES AND TYPEWRITERS

A NEW arrival tells how come he knows so much about war craft and the excitement they provide—some of which is included in gripping fashion in *Survival,* elsewhere in these pages.

My biography is not elaborate, so far, but if it's to be printed I agree that it should be printed while it's still printable. Here it is:

After a boyhood in which hunting, fishing and other naval sports figured extensively, I entered Annapolis in 1914. Was graduated in '17 by the grace of *Gott* and the Kaiser, but the Navy Department offset this by assigning me at once to the West Coast—as far as possible from the War Zone. Wrote a lot of letters requesting permission to go to war, and finally got a brief taste of what was officially known as convoy duty. A destroyer taking fast transports a couple of days' run out of New York, then turning back, picking up some more and doing it all over again. The real high point of the war came when old Neptune fired a porpoise at us one wet afternoon, which did look something like a torpedo—at least to a strictly noncombatant officer.

Did some assorted gunboating in the Caribbean, cruised the West Coast and fought the Battle of Salina Cruz—the naval equivalent of the Battle of Bordeaux, except that there was some shooting. Not just craps either—you'd be surprised.

After a short cruise with the Atlantic Fleet I hotfooted it out to the West Coast again—a billet in the Destroyer Force. I spent the next five years finding out how much there is to know about the little craft that battleship sailors tolerate as dispatch boats and damn fervently as unmitigated nuisances at maneuvers. Rivalry between the big ships and the "tin cans" was hot during the period of "readjustment of personnel" that followed the war. That isn't hard to understand either when you remember that the destroyers got Queenstown and the battleships—Yorktown! One memory pops up. The aftermath of a day's maneuvers—a torpedo attack that netted many, too many, hits on the battleships. The futile but perfectly beautiful language of a group of ranking battleship officers on the quarterdeck of the flagship trying to explain away eleven hits on one ship, with the umpires meekly sticking to their notes and the destroyer commodore burying wicked delight under an air of academic calm.

Oh well, if there's another war and the Navy Department catches me, I'll try the destroyers, thank you. Left the service in '24 to get acquainted with a wife and baby and am trying my hand at spinning yarns on paper. At any rate I'm going to try it for the next twenty years or so, and see how it goes.

L. Murney Mintzer

PARDNERS

HERE is another amusing tale out of the mellow years that are gone, an anecdote reported by my friend, H. A. Wells, out in Denver. Let him tell it himself.

John and Bill were prospecting, and had been pardners for several years. John was a man who got religion and joined the church about twice a year and was great at prayer meetings as long as he held out. But he was what is called a backslider and was a holy terror at cussin' between times and used to go on sprees and drink and gamble till he was broke. So he seldom had any money and few clothes. Bill, on the other hand, always had money and fairly good suit of clothes for special occasions. One Christmas they came to town and Bill was planning to take a girl to the Christmas dance. He talked so much about it and told John what a good time he expected to have that John got all worked up over the girl and dance idea and so when Bill went to get his hair cut John swiped Bill's suit of clothes, put them on and went to the dance. But John was a much bigger man than Bill and the result was that the coat and pants could not stand the strain and split wide open, showing John's red flannels in several places, after which he proceeded to celebrate in true Western style by trying to drink all the whisky in the town—which put the finish to Bill's suit and spoiled his Christmas. But Bill swore by all the gods he would get even.

During the spring John got a good streak on him and joined the church for the teenth time and met a nice girl and went to prayer meetings and all the brothers and sisters rejoiced. Now John and Bill were sinking a shaft below town and were down about thirty feet. They had not covered it, but the windlass was set on, for logs lay across the top. They also owned an old gray mule that was blind and which they used to pack when they were out in the hills and now used to take her down to feed all day near where they were at work. She had on an old cow bell so they could find her at night, and of course while grazing the bell would keep up a constant tinkle. Well, one day John was down in the shaft and Bill was at work sharpening some drills when he saw the minister and his flock carrying baskets full of good things going on a picnic. They would pass right by the mine shaft. Bill ran down to where the old mule was standing under a tree and took off her bell and sneaked back through the brush, ringing the bell as though the mule was feeding. He waited until the picnic party was close enough to hear John down in the shaft. Then he worked his way up close, tinkling the bell, and threw a handful of gravel down on John as though the mule had walked close to the shaft. John noticed the bell for the first time and then he began to holler for Bill. More dirt—and the bell still ringing. And then he began to pray for the Lord to make old Grey Bet to go away. More dirt and more bell, and he began to cuss and holler for Bill. By this time the pastor and his flock could hear every word he said. More dirt down the shaft and more bell and John turned to prayer, then he changed to cuss, and then to prayer with equal fervor. You can imagine the situation. When he finally got on top, it was all Bill could do to keep him from killing the old mule.

John did not know for many a long day why the church members passed him with a cool nod or looked the other way when they saw him coming. When he finally found out that Bill had put up the job on him there was an awful fight. But they got over that and remained the best of friends and pardners.

H. A. Wells

YELLOW GOLD AND BLACK

MINING stories, told by one who has mucked in the depths, are none too plentiful. EARL BENHAM CRANE, author of *The Secret of the Golden Isle* in this issue, tells how he came by his expert acquaintance with the business of mining gold.

The fact that my boyhood was spent largely in the mining camps of the Northwest during the romantic age of mining had much to do with my adopting mining engineering as a profession

My most vivid recollection of Wardner, Idaho, seems to be the thrill I got out of happening around some mine cookhouse at meal time and having the cook invite me to sit in with the miners. Wardner was a colorful camp with its saloons, dance halls, faro, street fights and a devil-may-care atmosphere which seemed, to an excitement loving kid, fairly to reek with romance.

My first job was at the Josie Mine in Rossland, British Columbia, where I learned that the "key to the sump" is in the same category with the time honored "left handed monkey-wrench," and that to have a "horse" in the vein is no joke.

After two years at the University of Idaho and two years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology I got a job at a mine in Greenwood, British Columbia. All I had to do was run the air compressor, keep up steam in a leaky boiler with wet wood and help in the blacksmith shop. Invariably, when the steam was low and some tough miner had his head in the window hollering for more air the blacksmith would clang a drill steel on the anvil as a signal for my assistance with the sledge hammer.

Several years spent as superintendent of a mine in Cobalt, Ontario, leave impressions of much native silver in flakes and sheets, small lakes, rolling hills, Doctor Drummond reciting his habitant poems, and friendly French Canadians.

Of the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon I think of snow, a country of magnificent distances tipped up at precarious angles, more snow and the rumble of avalanches.

The story idea of *The Secret of the Golden Isle* originated in the fact that the glorious career of the great Treadwell Gold Mine on Douglas Island, Alaska, was ended by the sea engulfing the workings.

Earl Benham Crane

THE ROMANCE OF MINING

IN HIS letter above, Mr. Crane says nothing of the peril and drama that his life must contain. Mining is a business, practical and efficient, but never will it be a humdrum occupation. My own boyhood was spent in the anthracite region near Wilkes-Barre, and well I remember the chill winds of fear that swept over the valley whenever the alarm siren at one of the mines cut loose in the silence of the night.

"Fire at Number Three!"

That cry rose in our little town eerily. And up the main street came men, scarcely dressed, running; women, holding babies to their breasts, running; doctors, in hastily hitched buggies, racing. Out beyond the last fringe of houses they went, headed for the imperiled mine where fire threatened the lives of husbands and brothers and sons. The little town had seen other disasters, and its terror was real.

There were heroes in those days. And, so long as men go down to the depths of the earth, there will be heroes again, whether they delve for grimy coal or gleaming gold.

INTRODUCING——

AN OLD-TIMER, lately taken to writing stories of the real West he knows so well, gives up this breezy word about himself. His story *Montana Man* in this issue is his first appearance in EVERYBODY'S. It's a mighty good yarn, don't you think?

Gang, howdy!

Me? I'm old enough to be your dad, but so's your old man. I was hunting for Indian relics in Illinois long before so many of them had been plowed under. That's a long time ago.

I have been places. I have seen the midnight sun from the shadow of Vindheima Jokull, in Iceland. I have sweltered under the relentless sun of the Caribbean. I have actually thought I was a wide-ranging hombre until EVERYBODY'S *Meeting Place* brought to my attention letters from real travelers. I feel like a piker.

I railroaded in the days of the link-and-pin, worked in sawmills before the safety first humanitarians discovered that the proper place for a man's fingers is on his hands, logged when the evening free-for-all was the only diversion, and forked a few when you had to ride to town to see a fence.

I am a member in good standing of the American Legion, Untied Spanish War Veterans, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. That's about all the wars that this country has had a hand in during my time. I was exempted from the Civil War draft because I had a mother and father to look forward to.

My pet aversion is a stacked deck. My favorite drink *was*. My hobby, peculiarly, is flower culture. I have produced thousands of new types of gladioli and primulinus hybrids. Next to a woman and a humming bird, I think God's most marvelous handiwork the common dandelion. Study one sometime when you have a week to appreciate its involved and intricate perfection. I've got to forget some men I've known before I can form any idea of man's place in the scheme of things. But, thank God, I've met the other kind and a lot of them. Next in my affections come dogs and horses.

I guess that's about all. I write to relieve myself of experience indigestion. I got so chock-a-block with experiences that I just had to write stories.

Oscar E. Jensen

P. S. Just leave that seeming error, "Untied Spanish War Veterans," ride. Some of your readers may have gone through that and have been tied up in a knot—as we all were—with the so-called food that was dished out to us. Those of us who survived are sure "Untied."

THE MARINES HAVE LANDED——

THIS past summer a Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to a lieutenant of Marines for extraordinary bravery in action. The Great War is ten years gone, but men of courage are still serving their country on arduous jungle trails close to the Equator.

This award was made to First Lieutenant Christian Frank Schilt. On January 3rd last an isolated detachment of Marines were grimly fighting for their lives in the wilds of Nicaragua. In the following narrative, Harold N. Denny of the New York *Times*, relates Lieutenant Schilt's extraordinary part in their rescue —a feat so extraordinary that I can't resist reprinting the story.

The survivors of two columns of Marines, who had been attacked overwhelmingly in two actions during the week preceding, struggled wearily into Quilali, carrying twenty-eight wounded men with them. They had buried seven other comrades along the trail. They were short of provisions and water and four of the wounded were so critically injured that their recovery was doubtful. What aid they had obtained had been from airplanes which dropped water and nails with which to build stretchers from saplings.

It was the most serious situation which American fighting men had faced since they fought in the Argonne. They were practically surrounded. The mountainous jungles around them were teeming with no one knew how many hostile natives.

Airplanes flew over and dropped a message to Lieutenant Gould ordering him to evacuate the town on the following day and take his wounded with him.

Lieutenant Gould was desperate, for he knew, as no one not actually on the scene could know, what a journey on muleback would mean to his critically wounded. He wrote a message begging for an air reconnoissance to determine whether or not a plane could land in the village, had it suspended by a cord stretched between two poles and an airplane picked it up with a grappling hook and took it to headquarters at Managua.

A few hours later Lieutenant Schilt swept up the valley in a small fighting plane and circled over the scene. Lieutenant Gould expected the aviator to drop a message in reply. Instead of that he circled the village, then nosed his plane down and landed in the village street. The wing tips of his tiny ship barely cleared the thatched hovels on either side. He had made an apparently impossible landing. The two officers conferred. Lieutenant Schilt told Lieutenant Gould to extend the landing place by tearing down shacks and smoothing off the street.

For three days the evacuation went on, while Gould kept outposts stationed around the town to balk any attempt of the Sandinistas to swoop and attack the plane, and while Lieutenant Frank Lamson-Scribner, another aviator, circled above trying to keep down the fire from the encircling hills with his machine gun.

Long before the evacuation was completed, Schilt's plane was almost a wreck. His tail skid was gone and a strut between the wings had been bent. He continued to fly without the skid and a blow with an ax straightened the strut well enough to keep the plane in operation.

On January 8 the last of the wounded men were removed to Ocotal to be hurried thence to Managua in big transport planes. Schilt had also brought Captain Roger W. Peard to assume command and he and Gould successfully conducted the surviving members of the expedition over the trails to safety.

THE NEWER EVERYBODY'S

WITH the next issue, EVERYBODY'S enters its third year as an all-fiction magazine. With the same issue I complete my first year as editor. Each has been a happy venture.

Starting anew in an unfamiliar field, EVERYBODY'S has drawn about it in these two years a body of readers and writers who regard it as their very own. It has grown steadily in prestige and circulation. Its newsstand sale has increased two and a half times. It has accomplished these things without ballyhoo or high pressure effort. EVERYBODY'S has made its way on its merits alone, and I am mighty proud of how far it has gone.

Somewhat in keeping with the place it now holds in the magazine field, the next EVERYBODY'S will appear with a few changes in makeup. Chief among these will be the new cover. It will be simple and striking and quite handsome. There will be no panel and colored border, as at present; and the limitations which that design imposes on our artists will no longer hinder them. The change will not be drastic. You will have no difficulty in recognizing the newer EVERYBODY'S and I am sure that you will like it even better than before.

One word more. There will be no difference in the quality of fiction appearing in these pages. If anything, we will search a little harder for finer material. Thousands of you in the past months have come across odd copies of EVERYBODY'S, have read them, and have been made loyal readers. To you, this promise to maintain a magazine of the best entertainment within our field, is a personal pledge.

WILLIAM CORCORAN

The NEWS *of* NEXT MONTH

THE AMA-ZULU DIAMOND

By E. Van Lier Ribbink

Deep in the forbidden country of Dinizulu, guarded by the gleaming spears of the fighting *impies*, this fabulous jewel awaited a buyer —or a conqueror. And of those who came over the somber veld to seize it, only one man and woman survived. This is their epic story.

A WORD ABOUT NEXT MONTH

Your next issue will have a bright new cover. It will be simpler, and, to judge from advance proofs, more effective than ever. This is an improvement I am very glad to make. It is in keeping with the place the new EVERYBODY'S has attained in the very first rank of all-fiction publications. Be sure to look for it on the stands on November 20th.—W. C.

SECRET OPERATIVE K-13

By Joel Rogers

Racing through the night, high over the battle lines, the most reckless ace on the Western Front flew to the rescue of the Allies' cleverest spy, the mysterious K-13. Their meeting and battle for life far in the rear of the German armies makes the most thrilling long novel of the War we've ever read. Don't miss this, the first of three generous instalments.

AND AMONG THE OTHER FEATURES

A novelette, "Will o' the Wasp," by Anthony M. Rud, who writes in gripping fashion of that strange, grim Western character, the professional badman; "Fear," by R. W. Alexander, a tale of the treacherous South Pacific; "The Man for the Job," by Clements Ripley, the story of a city gunman who bravely bucked the system. There are five other stories, and in addition the concluding chapters of Captain Dingle's saga of the Cape Horn whalers, "Sea Worthy."